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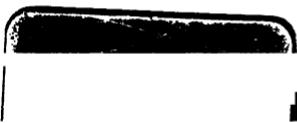
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A

BRIDE FROM THE RHINELAND.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

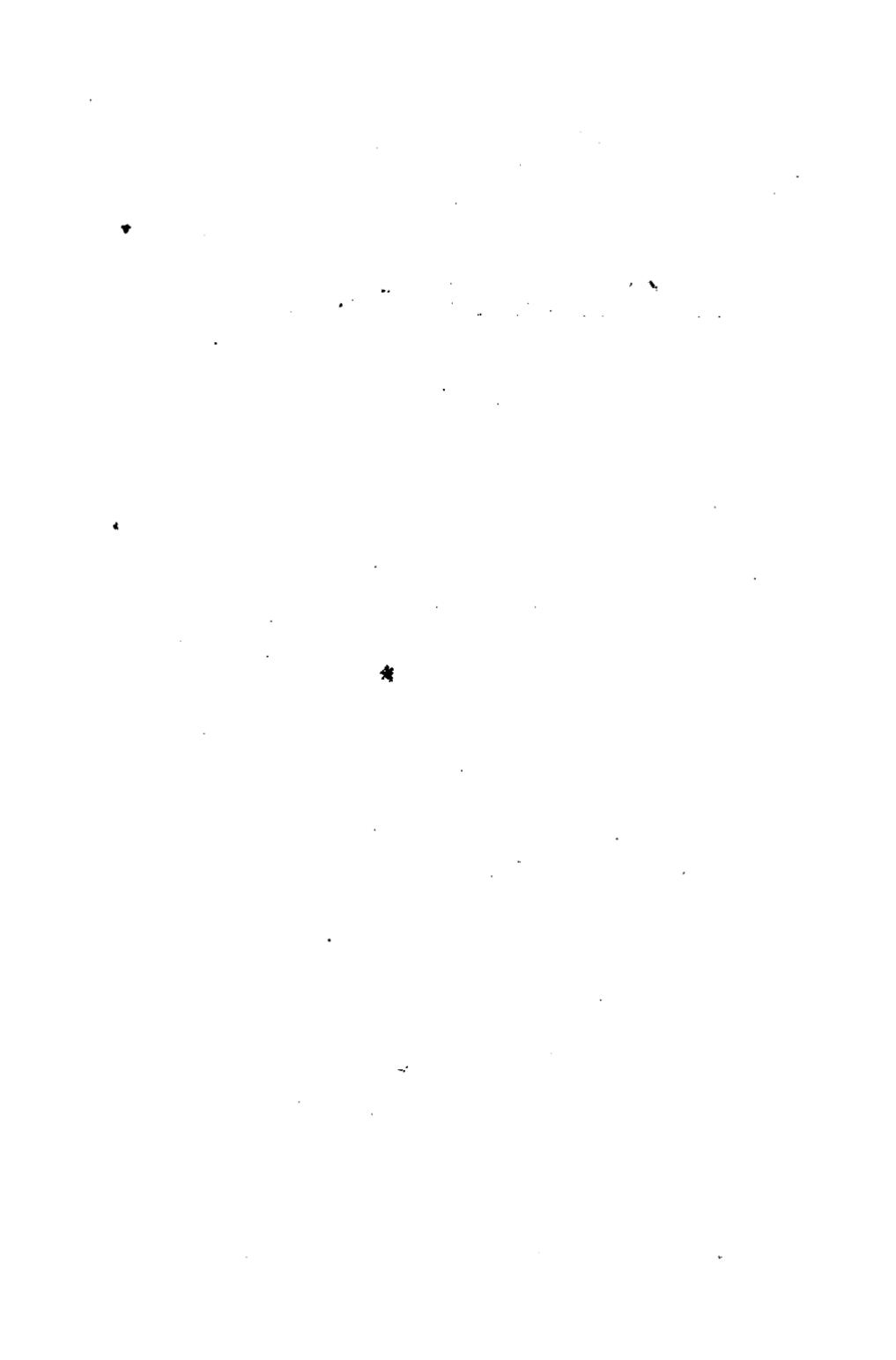


"Oh, bitterer far than all,
It was to know that love can fade and die.
"Hark—for the ages call,
The love of God lasts through all eternity,
And conquers all."

LONDON :
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, LOW, & SEARLE,
188, FLEET STREET.

1877.

251. d. 66a.





A BRIDE FROM THE RHINELAND.

CHAPTER I.

WILDLY the March winds blow, wildly they rave up the avenue, and toss the bare branches hither and thither in the twilight air. Can those be carriage wheels approaching Mordaunt Hall, this wild and windy day in March? It is hard to say, so loud the wind is howling—and yet, yes, it must be an arrival, for now the hall-bell rings.

Amelia Mordaunt hurried into the hall with an air of unusual animation, and

Lydia, pausing as she was about to quit it, asked :

“Who’s that?”

“It must be Mr. Alford,” replied Amelia quite eagerly.

Verina, also, had been passing through the hall as the door-bell rang, and she too paused for Amelia’s reply, standing with her hand resting languidly on the staircase rail, and her dreamy eyes bent on the speaker. It was not often now that things spoken round her were heeded by her, but now as she passed on, she repeated the guest’s name dreamily to herself. Not that she knew, or cared to know anything about him. She was not even aware that he was the ex-ambassador to Portugal—the object of Amelia Merdaunt’s tender attentions—and the acquaintance among all her acquaintances, Lady Catherine was most proud to call her friend.

Her "friend," as she called him, never responded very warmly to the attentions the Mordaunts bestowed on him. In fact he had always appeared to regard Lady Catherine and her daughters merely as amusing studies, treating Amelia, in particular, with rather an ironical politeness.

This indifference in nowise cooled Lady Catherine's "friendship" for him.

"He is so unlike anybody else; and then he has always such a quiet, witty way, you never can tell whether he is in jest or in earnest," she would say apologetically, and be quite content.

In reality, she valued his "friendship" simply because she considered that to be intimate with one so talented and distinguished was a distinction to herself. It was not possible that she should feel any real sympathy with a man like Mr. Alford.

He was far too clever, too thoughtful, too brilliant for Lady Catherine.

Singularly gifted and elevated in mind by nature, the opportunities of his life, likewise, had been very favourable to his mind's vigour and enlargement. In the course of his official career, he had learnt to know intimately many countries and many men; and to a nature deeply thoughtful as his, such advantages could not be granted in vain. Those keen eyes of his seemed, now, to have acquired the power to pierce straight through every one and everything. The observations those keen eyes reported to his busy mind, few, however, learnt; though all who had been thus studied felt an uncomfortable conviction that they should henceforth remain labelled in Mr. Alford's memory at exactly what they were worth and nothing more. This reserve was his second nature. So instinctively and

completely did he shroud his real self and his real opinions behind an impenetrable screen of quiet sarcasm from all intrusive inquirers, that none could ever even imagine that they thoroughly knew or understood the distinguished, world-renowned ambassador.

Intellectual pursuits and politics had absorbed his life to the exclusion of all softer feelings. He had no near relations, no particular friend; and did not appear in anywise to regret these circumstances. Yet he had a pity so deep, so ready for all who were unfortunate, that it was at times hard to believe the common report that he had never felt one tender emotion or softening grief. This suspicion was, however, again strongly opposed by the quiet, equable indifference of his manner, and its unfailing sarcastic cheerfulness. In truth, he had always moved among even the fairest and noblest in Imperial and Royal

Courts, utterly unimpressed ; and it was truly said of him, that even in his very youthful days, no woman's face had ever won from him one earnest notice.

In his capacity as diplomatist, he indeed bestowed the most chivalrous of attentions, the most pleasant of compliments on the bright, gay beauties round him, but very evidently he considered these attentions an important part of his official duties, and even in the compliments there was generally mingled an irresistible though not unpleasing touch of irony.

Still, though no one knew it, it was true, that one tender influence had been with him since his boyhood, keeping his heart still human. It was the remembrance of the plain, grave, elder sister, who had been like a mother to him when they were left orphans and friendless. She was much older than himself, and had died when he

was still a boy ; but often, even now, when after some great festival the witty, philosophical ambassador stood in his solitary room, the vision which arose before him was not that of any fair face which had smiled upon him, but of a grave, plain, unattractive woman with careworn eyes ; and the echo of words which he heard, was not that of any musical coquetties, but of the simple, long unheard welcome, “ Dear Hugh, so you are come at last.”

Thus had he secretly cherished the remembrance of the one affection of his life ; and this remembrance it was that had kept fresh and warm at least one spot in his heart.

In appearance Mr. Alford fully looked the perfect gentleman he was. He possessed a quiet dignity of manner too, which was very unlike Sir Arthur’s air of haughty assumption, and far more impressive.

Such was the guest who now entered the drawing-room at Mordaunt Hall.

“Why, Mordaunt,” he said, as he returned his host’s greeting, “it is actually six years since the day I saw you last, and obtained my one momentary glimpse of your sweet bride. You would be quite jealous did you know how often I have recalled the vision you showed me on the terrace here that day.”

Sir Arthur’s reply did not come as readily as usual. He even looked for an instant a little disconcerted. Such memories from the past were, to say the least, inappropriate in the present.

As Mr. Alford spoke he looked round for Lady Mordaunt. In her place Lady Catherine came forward and warmly welcomed him; but Mr. Alford was not satisfied. He was really rather impatient to see again the radiant face which had

charmed him as no other face had ever charmed him. It was therefore a disappointment to him that the long hours of the afternoon passed, without Lady Mordaunt's appearing. He consoled himself with the decision that the approaching dinner-hour would undoubtedly introduce him to her again. Dinner-time, however, came, and still no Lady Mordaunt—only a brief intimation that she was indisposed, and would dine in her own room that night.

Mr. Alford was greatly disappointed, and when the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room, his first thought was whether she would be there. With an eager searching glance he looked round the circle of ladies. Once more he was disappointed. Nowhere could he see the well-remembered Lady Mordaunt. He could not connect the idea of illness or of change with that terrace vision ; and so he

expected to find Verina still flitting about in her old graceful fashion, with quick, bright words for all, and her sweet face full of its old radiance. There was no such lady now in the drawing-room at Mordaunt Hall. There was, however, one who attracted and arrested his attention, so as to banish for a time his impatience for Lady Mordaunt's coming. There was something singular about this lady, something that puzzled him. She sat a little apart from the rest, dressed in mourning, and seemed neither to be expected nor to wish to take any part in the buzz of words around her. Her seat was drawn back a little from the circle, so that she was screened from even the observation of others. She seemed to have taken advantage of this, to forget their existence, for silent and motionless as a statue, she leant back on the cushions of her seat; her eyes

bent down on her own small white hands in a strange lifeless-like abstraction ; the long black lashes that rested on her pale cheeks never stirring ; the delicate lips never moving from their one expression of most pathetic patience.

As Mr. Alford regarded her, a great pity rose within him towards one so young and sad. He was wondering what her history might be, when Lady Catherine said suddenly, in a tone considerably sharper than that in which she had lately addressed Mr. Alford :

“ By-the-bye, Verina, Mr. Alford says that he is an old acquaintance of yours, and is anxious to introduce himself to you again.”

Mr. Alford’s astonishment at these words was great. To whom could Lady Catherine have addressed them ? Which of all these ladies could be Lady Mor-

daunt? Again he looked round him; and as before, only to fail to see in any face a resemblance to the one he so well remembered. He felt quite bewildered, as if Lady Catherine was conversing with an invisible spirit! and could not resist a smile at what seemed to him the absurdity of his situation, for that any of these ladies was his Lady Mordaunt, he could not believe. What then was his surprise when he saw that the strange, pale lady seemed to consider the remark addressed to her! The long black lashes which had rested so motionlessly on her pale cheek were now raised, revealing thus large softly brilliant eyes of the deepest sapphire, the most glowing life, eyes that looked as if by them only did she betray her vitality; as if in them was concentrated the whole life of that still face. Meeting the regard of those grave eyes, Mr. Alford could no

longer fancy that she who owned them was a lifeless statue ; for to his keen comprehension those wonderful eyes betrayed that a most impassioned life burnt beneath her quietude. And could those eyes be indeed the eyes of Lady Mordaunt, the once radiant Lady Mordaunt ? It seemed so, for this lady it was who now replied to Lady Catherine's remark. Her tone and words as she did so, though polite, were most calmly indifferent.

Mr. Alford hastily made his way to her side, and standing beside her, attempted to enter into conversation with her.

It happened that that evening Verina was even unusually heart-sick and weary of everything, for before her there was floating persistently a vision of a little childish figure, which for ever sprang towards her with outstretched arms, and with fair curls floating round its little shoulders, and its

merry voice crying “Mamma, mamma.” Do what she would, Verina that evening could in nowise banish this vision, or the most painful thoughts of the utter hopelessness of her lot. She was therefore little inclined to enter into conversation. All Mr. Alford said, she answered gently, but with the same most distant politeness, and a manner that did not at all encourage a continuation of his conversation ; and at length, as though wearied by his perseverance, she took the opportunity offered by a momentary pause to rise and leave him. His eyes eagerly followed her. He saw her sit down by a great embroidery stand, where she remained for the rest of the evening mechanically weaving in the silken threads. And all that evening Mr. Alford watched her with a painful interest and sad surprise. He saw Sir Arthur pass close to where she bent over her work without

either speaking to her or glancing at her, or seeming in any degree more conscious of her existence than she appeared to be of his. Once only did Mr. Alford see her address her husband. He did not catch the import of her words, but the shy restrained tone in which she spoke, and the manner of his brief reply, struck Mr. Alford painfully.

He also saw that all that evening none sought her, none noticed her; and he felt very certain that no eyes but his remarked the look of weary suffering which darkened down upon the young, fair face, as the hours passed by.

When he had retired to his own room Mr. Alford threw himself into a chair, and gave himself up to a long fit of musing. His thoughts were full of Verina. Her mournful eyes haunted him, and he was shocked and grieved to find her so altered.

“I never considered Sir Arthur worthy of the treasure he had found,” mused Mr. Alford, “but I did not think it would come to this. She who was one in a thousand—in whom there was the germ of every noble quality! Alas! that such a nature should have been so wasted and withered! What might she not have been now, if her pure life could have unfolded itself unchecked—if her husband had been capable of understanding and appreciating her rare and noble character? What might she not have become, if, for instance, she had been my wife? for how tenderly would *I* have cherished her—the happy life should never then have faded from her face, and I would have taught her all I knew; have shared my very thought, my every pursuit with her and her only; and she would have rejoiced in this, and in return she would have revealed to me all her noble aspira-

tions, all her own pure thoughtful inner life. Between us, there would have been no thought of which should rule. We should have been equals, and as one soul together.

“Ah, how different too would my life have seemed, how different would it be now if I had indeed been blessed with such a wife as the wife Sir Arthur evidently despises because he is incapable of appreciating any one so superior to himself; if, when weary and careworn, I could turn and bathe myself in the fresh innocence, the deep affection of the Verina of long ago! Oh, it is too provoking to see how wasted on Sir Arthur has been that priceless jewel! Why, oh, why, does fate so often join together those who are totally unsuited, and irrevocably separate those who could appreciate one another?”

Mr. Alford sprang suddenly to his feet.

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“ Bah ! whatever has lead me to this most unprofitable dream ?” he asked himself reprovingly. Nevertheless, before long his thoughts reverted again to Verina.

“ I long to bring back at last one real smile to her sad face,” he said half aloud.



CHAPTER II.

MR. ALFORD had not been long at Mordaunt Hall before he thoroughly understood the state of affairs there, and had determined on two things. The one he had most at heart did not appear likely to succeed. His efforts to penetrate Verina's reserve, or to gain from her anything more than the distant proud civility she accorded to all, seemed quite vain. Verina had no wish to be intimate with any of Lady Catherine's friends, nor did she for a moment imagine that it was anything more than accident

that brought Mr. Alford so frequently to her side. She was perfectly unconscious and unsuspicuous of the ever-deepening interest he took in her.

Mr. Alford's efforts in behalf of his second object were more successful. The slighting words that were spoken of Verina, and to her, provoked him much ; and he had determined to do his best to make a change in this respect, in his presence at least. One day, therefore, a sarcasm directed at Verina was, to the astonishment of all, intercepted by Mr. Alford, and flung back on the speaker with such dexterous celerity as made it strike home ; and wrapped as his repartee was in a garb of profound though most transparent politeness, it was quite unanswerable. Even Lady Catherine did not escape Mr. Alford's vigorous repulses. No one could quite understand this ; but that

Mr. Alford was prompted by nothing more than a mere idle love of opposition, they could not doubt, for that Verina could be an object of interest to the great Mr. Alford was an idea "too absurd." Nevertheless it became before long pretty well understood, that for some cause or other, Mr. Alford had constituted himself Verina's defender, and that the less said of her or to her in his presence, the better, unless you wished to bring down on you one of his icy cool, exquisitely civil, exquisitely crushing rejoinders.

No one could be more surprised at Mr. Alford's conduct than was Verina herself. That this also was mere accident, she could not think ; but why he should thus act, puzzled her very much. She began to consider him a little more, and occasionally she turned on him a wondering, questioning gaze.

It was evening. The brilliant lamps lit up the long suite of drawing-rooms, but they were deserted, and through the open windows came the sound of voices from the terrace, where the whole party were strolling up and down. They had been tempted to this imprudence more by the fact of the past days having been unusually warm, than by the evenings being the same; and at length the general discovery was made, that the night was after all very chilly, anything but what an April evening should be; and every one hurried towards the open windows through which the brilliant light streamed invitingly on to the terrace. Lady Millicent, who was passing the evening at the Hall, was however unwilling to re-enter the house. At least she declared herself to be so, and thus elicited, as she intended to elicit, Sir Arthur's earnest protestations against "her impru-

dence," and his tender anxiety to shield her from the cold night breezes. At length she yielded to his earnest request, and the terrace was once more deserted. Deserted at least by all but one.

"Where is 'Lady Mordaunt?'" inquired Mr. Alford.

"Oh, is she not come in?" said Lydia, glancing carelessly round the room. "If she is not in, most probably she is out—sentimentalising in the moonlight doubtless."

"Composing that original thing, 'A Sonnet to the Moon,'" added Lady Millicent as she gracefully waved her fan.

Sir Arthur laughed.

Mr. Alford, perfectly indifferent to the ownership of it, took up a fur cloak, and went out again on to the terrace.

"Mr. Alford seems to constitute himself Verina's guardian," said Amelia pettishly.

She did not like her sister-in-law any the better for obtaining the attentions she would willingly have seen bestowed upon herself. "What do you say to all this, Arthur?"

The brother and sister were standing alone together. Sir Arthur replied quickly, "What I say to it is—that Lady Mordaunt had better take care what she is about."

His tone was very stern, and the expression which flashed to his face was one that made Amelia wish she had not asked the question.

Mr. Alford walked on, till he came to a portion of the terrace on which no light fell from any window. It was illumined only by the starlight, but that was sufficient to enable him to recognise in the dark figure that here walked up and down, the figure of Lady Mordaunt.

She had listened to the tender entreaties of anxious parents and chaperons, that their careless young ladies would wrap cloaks closer round them and hurry to the house; had listened to her husband and Lady Millicent's playful lover-like dispute, and as she listened, with bitter force there came over her the vivid sense of her own loneliness. No anxious voice entreated her to wrap a mantle closely over her, no tender parent, no careful husband expostulated with her for braving the cold night air. It was but a little thing, a small neglect, but it flashed her desolateness on her as perhaps a greater neglect might not have done.

“Oh, father! oh my Evelyn! I am so quite alone,” were the words her feverish lips murmured, as an excitement of almost uncontrollable grief and wretchedness shook her slight frame. Then with feverish

haste she hurried up and down the dark terrace, striving to calm herself thus, and by the exhaustion that would follow.

“Lady Mordaunt,” said a friendly voice, “I am come to expostulate with you on your imprudence. It is more like a night in December than a night in April, so pray come in.”

He had come upon Verina so unexpectedly, that she had not time to regain her usual impenetrably proud quietude of expression, and the countenance she now turned upon him wore still its expression of intense, passionate, rebellious suffering. It was a fierce anguish such as he had never seen on any face before, and it gave him a pang to see it now, where, as he remembered, there was once nothing but a radiant, gentle gladness.

With assumed unconsciousness he continued :

“At any rate put on this cloak.” And without waiting for her permission, he wrapped it closely round her. “You do not look fit to encounter such cold blasts as these,” he added, glancing at the slightness of her figure, and the fragile whiteness of the hand that languidly pressed the cloak closer to her.

Verina thanked him, but in a tone of cold indifference, and with the same indifference she yielded to his repeated request that she would return to the house.

The drawing-rooms were again deserted. Sounds of music and dancing came from the great hall. Apparently, Verina had no intention of joining the gay party there. She remained beside the open window by which she had entered, gazing absently out into the night, the soft fur cloak still wrapped round her. She was unaware of the intent sad regard Mr. Alford was

bending on her, unaware even that he was still beside her, till he spoke :

“ How gay the *improvista* ball looks ! shall we join the rest ? ”

Verina did not answer, she only shivered as if the idea was abhorrent to her, and sighed low and impatiently.

In a tone of deep pity Mr. Alford continued :

“ I often think how painful all this must be to you, and forgive my saying what I, a comparative stranger, ought perhaps not to say—I often wish that you had at least one friend.”

He spoke with so much true, tender feeling, that his kind words fell on her heart like a shower of rain on a barren, arid land. She had long ceased even to wish for kindness, accepting her fate with the indifference of hopelessness. Those words and the pitiful regard seemed to awaken

the old softer feelings. To her dark eyes great tears gathered, falling slowly one by one ; but she did not speak. Nothing more passed between them then, but before the evening was over, Verina had turned on him a gentle trusting look that said very much to him and moved him strangely.



CHAPTER III.

NEXT morning, Mr. Alford seated himself by Amelia, and in a careless tone began :

“ What becomes of your mysterious sister-in-law all day ?”

“ Oh, she has her own suite of rooms, and sits there, much preferring her own company to ours; I can’t say we miss her much. She is full of odd fancies and very *peculiar*,” replied Amelia, with a slight toss of her head and a significant accent on the last word. “ Shall we have our game of billiards now ?” she continued.

“I shall be delighted,” he replied in a tone of extreme politeness, but without moving.

Amelia frowned. The frown was however lost on Mr. Alford, for he was not looking at her.

Presently he rose, and as Verina quitted the drawing-room and entered the hall by one door, he did the same by another, and meeting her, said :

“Lady Mordaunt, do you never allow any one to share your retirement?”

Lady Mordaunt looked surprised at such an unheard-of proposal and hesitated.

“I will not be *very* troublesome; may I come some morning?” he entreated.

“Yes,” said Verina at length, gravely as ever.

“Thank you; now do not forget that you are not to send me away, if some morning I find the clue to your sitting-

room through this great labyrinth of a house."

Verina smiled a little, a very little, and passed him in silence.

Instead of even then seeking Amelia for the promised game of billiards, Mr. Alford went out and walked up and down before the drawing-room windows. Amelia watched him with great vexation, and could she have read his thoughts she would not have felt flattered. She would have found them to be: "Sweet, pale snowdrop among all these gaudy tulips! and they dare to call you 'fanciful,' and to say they do not miss you! No wonder you are still doubtful even of me—you have had good cause to learn to doubt every one, and to shrink from every one, for other than all these gay, pitiless, heartless people cannot often have assembled here, where Lady Catherine and her daughters rule. Yes,

it will be hard to pierce through the armour of ice in which they have taught you to shroud yourself ; but break through I will. If I do not save you, no one else will move a little finger to do so. Yes, my good Sir Arthur, whilst you press Lady Millicent's hand tenderly as you did last night, and praise her beautiful hair, I will try and comfort your pale wife for you!"

The following morning Mr. Alford did find his way to Verina's room. As he entered it, he cast a glance of great interest round the scene of Verina's strange, solitary life. Its aspect was, as he expected, most characteristic of its mistress. The impress of her refinement, and her keen sense of the beautiful, was on everything the room contained. No clashing colours, nothing awkward was to be seen : all was harmonious, everything perfect of its kind. The profusion of flowers and

the delicious fragrance from them which pervaded the whole apartment, especially struck him, but in Mr. Alford's eyes the fairest object that room contained was its mistress with her fragile loveliness, her wonderful eyes and her gentle smile of welcome. She was half reclining on the sofa in her graceful way, and one slender foot was just visible, resting on the velvet footstool. She was reading when he entered, but now she laid aside her book and welcomed him with a grave gentleness. There was no trace in face or manner of the intense emotion he had witnessed there that evening on the terrace.

“What wonderful strength of mind Lady Mordaunt must possess to be able to force herself to resign everything, submit to everything quietly, as she does. But she carries it too far. It

would be a great deal better for her if she did not exercise quite so much self-control," were the thoughts that passed hastily through Mr. Alford's mind as he seated himself opposite Verina and began expressing his admiration of her beautiful room and its fragrant flowers.

Presently he said :

" I must tell you of the amusement Miss Amelia Mordaunt has just been kind enough to afford me. She has been trying to make me believe that she knows a vast deal about geology, and takes a great interest in it. In reality she is perfectly ignorant of the subject. I wish you had been present that you might have shared the richness of seeing her puzzling herself among the stratas and trying to look supernaturally wise."

" Are you not a great friend of theirs ?" asked Verina quickly.

“ Most certainly not. Why, what have I done, Lady Mordaunt, that you should pay me so doubtful a compliment ?”

He had the great satisfaction of finding that from this moment Verina began to open out a little towards him.

“ Finding you reading quietly alone, whilst all the others are amusing themselves so differently, reminds me of the old story of Lady Jane Grey and her Plato. You read a great deal, do you not ?”

“ Yes,” answered Verina. She paused, and then added half shyly, “ But do what I will, the day seems very long.”

That first shy confidence touched Mr. Alford deeply. Its shyness, and the wistful look in the grave eyes that were raised to him, spoke so sadly of a long isolation.

Mr. Alford answered in a tone whose assumed lightness was an evident effort to conceal deep feeling.

“But that must not be. You must let me come here and read to you and talk to you, and do everything I can to amuse you.”

How strange sounded such words to Verina! They were like an echo from the almost forgotten past, an echo from beyond the verge where the forlorn dark years began!

With a most grateful look, she thanked him.

Then he talked to her on many subjects, doing his best to amuse and interest her. Before he rose to leave her, he said:

“Now, before I go, I must ask you something — will you accept me as a friend?”

“You wish to be my friend?” repeated Verina wonderingly. Her dark eyes filled with tears, and she continued: “I can scarcely understand such words. You

do not know how strange they sound to me."

"Nor do you know how it grieves me that you should have cause to say this," replied Mr. Alford quickly, and with deep feeling. He continued: "Then you *do* accept me as your friend?"

"Yes, gladly," Verina answered, raising to him those innocent eyes in which there dwelt no thought of evil.

"Then thus do I thank you, and thus do I seal our compact," said Mr. Alford, and he kissed the white hand that lay beside him. "And, believe me, that you may fully trust me and rely on me, as on one who has your welfare most deeply at heart."

"It will be new life to me to have a friend," replied Verina with a grave simplicity.

How incredulous, how indignant would

Lady Catherine and her daughters have been had they been told that the homage which they would so gladly have received from the distinguished, much-courted ambassador, was laid by him, with chivalrous respect, unsought, at Verina's feet !



CHAPTER IV.

THAT Mr. Alford should spend the morning in Verina's fragrant, pretty sitting-room, and as he had proposed, read to her, and talk to her, and do everything he could to amuse her, soon became an established rule.

And so familiar a guest did he become, that ere long he even had there his especial favourite place. It was beside the window, looking from which you looked up a long vista of the park—a glade of greenest grass, close cropped by fearless stags, and shaded here and there by lofty beeches.

Opposite this glade Mr. Alford would seat himself, and whilst he rested his eyes with pleasure on the fair English scene without, he would sit and tranquilly talk, as he loved to talk to Verina, and as Verina loved to hear him, of every thought or remembrance just as it arose in his fertile mind. But that there should be conversation in the true sense of the word he took care to ensure. He did so by constantly appealing to Verina for her ideas, her opinion on what he said. He strove, too, with all the tact of a tender regard, to decoy her into discussions of every sort, so that at least, for a time, she might forget the painful present.

Her slightest wish became to him a law ; her slightest word he treasured up and honoured. That the intimacy between them, caused by this tacit understanding of chivalrous devotion on his part, and tender, grate-

ful admiration on hers, was a hazardous experiment he did not choose to consider ; nor did he choose to ask himself whether mere friendly feeling could inspire him with the unfailing, untiring, watchful tenderness, to bestow which on Verina he delighted to be privileged.

So earnest was he in his longing to cheer her, that he would think the day a fortunate one if in it he had gained from her one *real* smile. No one, who had been so long friendless as had Verina, could have failed to be deeply touched by such devotion. She was most deeply grateful to him, and always regretted the arrival of the hour which obliged him to leave her. Mr. Alford, however, was not satisfied with the result of his efforts. She never brightened as he wished her to brighten, and he began to fear that her life had been too crushed ever to revive. In spite of this misgiving

he persevered, and he anxiously sought to find for her some amusement, some pursuit, whose novelty and interest might bring her real pleasure, and carry her beyond the shadow of that Upas-tree—the dark and hopeless Present.

At length he accidentally attained his wish. He had been talking to her in his most thoughtful tone. He seemed to have touched the right chord at last, for as she listened, Verina's dark eyes beamed, and her face lit up with the very expression which had so attracted him when first he saw her : it was a look of earnest brightness such as he had never seen on any other face.

“ All my life through,” she said, “ I have wished to hear some one speak as you so often do—of thoughts and great ideas, not of tangible, commonplace things only. And, oh ! the gladness of hearing

you say the sort of things, and knowing you think the sort of things, that I have always thought, although I have been considered almost devoid of my senses for so doing. You cannot think how pleasant it is to find that my world has not really been the mere baseless dream-land it is described to me. But, pray go on and tell me now some more of these wonders of science that men's minds have as you say studied out, for when I listen to such things I can lose myself in what you tell me, and live and breathe once more!"

The tender smile, that none but Verina ever saw, came to Mr. Alford's lips.

"That is what you would like, is it? Tell me first if you are very learned on such subjects?"

"Oh no!" answered Verina, rather

humbly. "Science is one pursuit I have never tried."

"Then we will have a regular course of lectures!" cried Mr. Alford delightedly.

This new occupation proved most beneficial. Verina engaged in it with interest, almost with eagerness; and, in so doing, she unconsciously betrayed more and more clearly to her penetrating companion how brilliant was the intellect, how refined the mind, how poetical the imagination, with which she was endowed. Nor had these gifts been left uncultured. These years of solitude had not been wasted. Therefore it was a singularly cultivated understanding, as well as a naturally most noble and gifted nature, which now displayed itself to her sympathising companion. For a time the old habit of reserve still clung to her—to her who was once ready to

confide in all, loving all, doubting none ; but, ere long, this reserve vanished before the friendship and companionship of one who could share and comprehend her every thought, and converse with her on the noblest themes. She had never realised how much she needed such companionship till now that it was hers. She would always have been worthy of it, but more than ever she was so now ; for, as the storms and bareness of winter are followed by earth's most teeming season, so the dark grief that had come upon her seemed to have roused her mind to still deeper thought, and grander views, and to have unlocked the very depths of her being.

The "lectures," as Mr. Alford smilingly called them, had begun the very next day. He possessed a most perfect command of language, a wonderful precision

of expression, and a glowing imagination, so that to listen to him, when once induced to speak on these his favourite subjects, would have fascinated the attention of the most indifferent. Verina listened to him with deepest interest.

Most pleasant were the morning hours thus spent in that quiet room, where none but themselves ever came. These quiet hours kept at bay the spectres of grief and care that had so long haunted Verina. Their shadows were around her still, but the dark spectres themselves shrank away before Mr. Alford's presence. In his presence Verina could often only dwell with a rapture which was almost pain on the thought that beside her there was one who cared for her, and pitied her; and at times, instead of listening to the words he read, Verina

would resign herself to the gladness of realising this, and that the voice she heard was indeed the voice of a tender friend. The inconceivable bliss of such a thought to the desolate, friendless Verina — its unspeakable sweetness ! to the long haven-seeking, shipwrecked heart it was so restful a belief ! Formerly the sternest self-control in thought and feeling, and even in study, had been necessary for the maintenance of anything approaching tranquillity. Now she dared to relax that control, for Mr. Alford's presence and the knowledge that there was one beside her who would fain shield and cherish her, brought tranquillity of itself. She felt as if now she needed only sufficient strength to falter on a little way into the sanctuary of that tender friendship, and that then she could lie down and rest, the long struggle over, the

long battle done ; and the stern fortitude with which she had borne up against adversity seemed ready to desert her now, for at times she could scarcely refrain from turning aside and weeping for very gratitude, as of late years she had seldom wept for sorrow.

It was not of science only that they conversed in those pleasant morning hours. No theme was too great, none too little to be mentioned by them. Nothing one said could fail to be deeply interesting to the other, and where such sympathy is certain there is an end to all oppressive reserve and silence. Mr. Alford related to Verina much of his past life ; told her of the early reminiscences of his boyhood, talking to her with an unreserve he had never before bestowed on any ; and, delighting in this unreserve, Verina was equally frank towards him. There

was only one subject that was never discussed between them, this subject was the unhappy circumstances of Verina's position. With instinctive delicacy both avoided conversing on this painful theme.

Mr. Alford liked particularly their readings of their favourite poets. He used to read them aloud, Verina illustrating the scenes as he read. It was quite one of her characteristic traits that she never could see a blank piece of paper without covering it with the most beautiful little creations. She never seemed to be thinking of them, or studying them, for she would do this even when speaking earnestly on the most foreign subjects; it was as if these exquisite things grew in her pencil, for it needed but for her to rest her pencil upon the paper, and forthwith they sprang up like magic

beneath her touch. Mr. Alford would often pause and watch her, and exclaim that it was the most extraordinary thing in the world, the way she could in a moment produce the loveliest figure, whilst he or any one else might pore for hours over a sheet of paper and nothing would come of it. Verina would smile, and reply that nothing could be more easy, that they came of themselves, and that she had nothing to do with their arrival.

It was not long before this close intercourse revealed to Mr. Alford that Verina was indeed the very ideal being for whom he had all his life "waited," and for whose sake he had passed the fairest faces with indifference. Daily, with a mingled joy and dread, he still more clearly recognised this, and that it was Verina alone who could "complete his life." And, alas! had

he not become the one being who could now "complete" Verina's?

Weeks passed thus, and beneath the sunshine of Mr. Alford's unvarying, tender friendship—slowly, but surely, Verina's fading life revived. A change which, slight as it was, was at times perceptible even to her unheeding relatives, came over her. At times her pale cheek wore once more a faint glow, like that of a

"Lily, which the sun
Looks through in his sad decline,
And a rose-bush leans upon."

Her eyes, too, had lost their unheeding, abstracted gaze; and in the evenings, though she still did not attempt to take much part in what went on, she would often look up with eager interest—when it was Mr. Alford who spoke.

They did not talk much to one another in public; but whilst speaking to others,

Mr. Alford would throw quick glances to Verina, appealing to her thus for interest and approbation, and Verina knew that much of what he said to others was really intended for her alone. And it was so pleasant to her to know, that there was at least one in that assembly who cared for her attention far more than for the attention of all others.



CHAPTER V.

“  HAVE just been taken by Lady Catherine to pay your boy a visit, and a fine, beautiful boy he is,” said Mr. Alford one morning, as he laid down the book he had been reading to Verina. “ Still,” continued Mr. Alford gently, “ he has not the angel look his sister had.”

Verina shrank at the words as though he had touched a tender wound, but Mr. Alford went on resolutely, though gently :

“ You must let me tell you with what a pang I heard of your loss. I had so often

thought of you, as I saw you that first and only time, standing on the terrace here with the sweet little one playing at your feet. Then when I heard that that little one had been taken from you, it grieved me much."

Verina did not answer ; she had hid her face in her hands. It was the first time any one had spoken so tenderly of her Evelyn, and there was such a sincerity of earnest pity in his voice.

"I am sure she must have always been the sweetest little thing ; and I should so like to hear something about her, if it would not pain you too much to speak of her to me."

Verina looked up with eager wistfulness.
"I would gladly tell you of my darling, if you really wish it."

"If you can doubt that I do, you wrong our friendship," he answered earnestly.

Speaking low, and quickly, Verina began :

“ I will try and tell you what she was like, how bright, how intelligent, how quite a companion to me she was ; but even I could never fully describe to you the charm of her merry, gentle ways—of her unselfishness, her tenderness to every living thing, her devoted love for me. I used to think that she was my guardian angel, for when she clung to me and kissed me, I could forget all grief and care ; and when I remembered how she was watching for my coming, it was so easy to bear all things calmly——”

Already Verina could go no further. Her voice faltered, and once more she hid her face in her hands, whilst great tears stole through her slender fingers. They were the first she had shed for Evelyn since the day of Evelyn’s death.

The pitiful eyes resting on her so tenderly had unloosed the fountain of her grief, and the long frozen tears once melted, would no longer be restrained. Mr. Alford made no attempt to calm her, for he had wished, nay, intended that she should weep ; but when at length the low sobs ceased, he said very tenderly :

“ You are not vexed with me, are you ? ”

Verina raised her face to him with a sad, gentle smile :

“ No, oh no,” she said ; “ those tears have made me feel human again.”

Once more Mr. Alford took one white hand in his, reverently kissing it.

Some days later, Mr. Alford’s concluding “ lecture ” on geology took place. He then wished to gain Verina’s admiration for some strange fossils ; but with something of her old playful brightness, Verina

pushed them remorselessly away, and she said :

“ Do not show them to me, for, alas! they are very ugly things ; let me imagine how they looked when they were darting about in the blue waves, without any such disillusion as seeing them turned into brown stones.”

“ Really, Lady Mordaunt, they are very interesting,” remonstrated Mr. Alford ; but Verina could not be persuaded to think so. Notwithstanding her want of admiration for fossils, Verina was greatly fascinated by her geological studies. Whilst in imagination she wandered through the tropical forests, beneath giant ferns and reeds ; and beheld the flying dragons, and hideous reptiles—then the sovereigns of the worlds that have faded away into their rock-bound graves ; and as she realised that over the very spot where she now sat, there once

had "rolled the stillness of the central sea," she was filled with a glad reverence, and the sorrows of life seemed to pass away from her into nothingness before the majesty of eternity. Her mind craved great thoughts to satisfy it. In elevated thoughts alone could she now find peace.

"It is so calming to sit in the shadow of great ideas," she said one day, "and if one could but imbue one's whole being with the like conceptions so thoroughly as to leave no room for minor ones to enter; if one could but dwell in this higher region; if one could but fully grasp the greatness of the universe, and of the unchanging magnificence of the laws that govern the ages as they unfold towards perfection: then the cares of life could not vex, the din and discord of life would be unheard, for in the presence of such greatness one would

learn one's own insignificance, and to regard as trifles the deepest griefs of such insignificant beings! It is you who have taught me to fully understand my own longings, but I have always dimly felt this wish to rise above everything; to leave no room in me for earthly griefs and cares. But, alas! it is difficult, as Wordsworth says :

“‘to keep
Heights that the soul is competent to gain.’”

“And even if you could,” he replied, “would so purely an intellectual life satisfy you? Would there not be times when you would speak of it, as another poet did of fame?” and he read aloud :

“‘Happy, happier far than thou,
With the laurel on thy brow,
She that makes the humblest hearth
Lovely but to one on earth.

Thou hast a charmèd cup, oh Fame,
A draught that mantles high ;
And seems to lift this mortal frame
Above mortality.
Away—to me a woman bring,
Sweet waters from affection's spring.'"

" Yes," answered Verina mournfully, " undoubtedly it would be so : but as that fountain is closed to me I would fain drink the deeper of the one that is attainable. I would fain forget all things in one long draught from it; making it my river of Lethe. Not, however, for the sake of forgetfulness only would I drink that draught ; no, for its own sake I thirst for it—to know and understand perfectly is in itself an inspiring aim."

" Yet, after all, is not grief mightier than all philosophy ?"

" Yes, far mightier, I know that only too well. You might have gone on with your

quotation. You could have said with truth :

“ ‘ A hollow sound is in thy song,
A mockery in thine eye,
To the sick heart that doth but long
For aid, for sympathy,
For kindly looks to cheer it on,
For tender accents that are gone.’

At least at times this would be appropriate. Still,” continued Verina with her sad smile, “ philosophy is better than nothing. And is it not this that you yourself have made me see clearly ? How is it that to-day you seem bent on unteaching the very lesson which you have taught me ?”

A sigh escaped Mr. Alford. He did not answer her, but sank into a reverie. He was wondering what a few more years of such a life would do for the now gentle, tender, womanly Lady Mordaunt. A few more years of this solitary, intellectual, un-

loved existence, and what would be left of her former self, but the keen clear intellect before whose power others would at length learn to bow, but whose possessor none could love, for the warm heart would be grown pitiless and hard, filled, perhaps, with bitterness towards all, and repelling all with scornful coldness. In thought he passed on into these future years, and saw sitting in the gentle Verina's place, a stern, harsh woman, devoid of all gentler emotions, bending with keen all-absorbing interest over a scientific treatise. Once more he sighed. It grieved him to think of the future ruin of a once so fair-proportioned temple. "And yet must it not come to this?" he asked himself; "must not in very self-defence the neglected heart grow cold? unless, indeed, it one day arises bursting all formal bounds, reasserting itself and its rights in some desperate way?"

Mr. Alford was a philosopher, but not a Christian, or he would have remembered that still one other course was possible.

It was the custom at Mordaunt Hall to spend part of the evenings on the terrace or in the garden, whenever the weather permitted. Many pleasant hours did Verina and her friend thus pass, sitting out on the broad terrace, and watching the stars appearing one after the other in the twilight sky. One evening they had sought their favourite seat. It was in a distant part, where the rest seldom came ; and where a giant cedar flourished close beside the terrace, and spread his dark branches far over a neighbouring flight of terrace steps, and over the terrace itself. Here the surrounding garden was more private and wilder than in the front of the house, for here various trees, clumps of shrubs, and long glades of grass were mingled with the

flower-beds ; here too the garden swept away to its termination in a broad belt of spruce firs. With their solemn olive boughs they shut it in, their dark tapering tops standing out clearly from the deep blue sky, which was gemmed with faintest stars. Through a break in the fir barrier, the plain was visible, lying far, far below them ; and here and there on its wide expanse, dim red lights were shining, thus showing where lay the various towns. The solemn beauty of the scene was not diminished by the occasional bursts of summer lightning, that every now and then would flash over the whole breadth and depth of the sky in one broad sheet of quivering golden light.

Long and thoughtfully Verina gazed upon the scene. At length she said :

“ It is hard to believe that what we were talking of this morning is really true—

hard to believe this world ever looked so different from what it does now ; that here on this very spot where the green turf springs, and we look up through the clear air to countless stars, there once swelled great waves, and over our heads fish swam !"

" Does it seem strange to you ? To me it seems the most natural thing possible," said Mr. Alford in his pleasant, tranquil voice.

As he spoke he was leaning back with an air of perfect contentment. And in truth the still beautiful night, and in it Verina seated by him, the starlight through the cedar branches just revealing the outline of her figure and the expression of her face, were sufficient to make him feel life very perfect.

There was a pause—broken by Mr. Alford :

“Let me give you an idea which has just come into my head. Look here, this little fellow has brought it.” As he spoke he pointed to a tiny moth that was making its way along a fold of Verina’s dress. “But it is to a cousin of his, not to himself, that my story relates. This cousin, if she were now to appear before you, you would say was a most commonplace-looking little person, with the soberest brown dress, and not a speck of colour about her. Place her under a microscope, and what a transformation would take place! As an enthusiastic admirer of hers says, no man has ever invented so gorgeous a robe as she really wears; resplendent golden feathers cover her body and wings, sparkling gem-like points scatter light in all directions, while on the edges of each feather, rainbow tints dance and quiver; and it seems as if she wore two robes—a loose golden feather

one above, and a rainbow itself below. Each fibre of the fringe that edges the wing is a prism, and even her slender horns are covered with golden feathers. Now, for hundreds of years all this beauty was invisible to every human eye. Who, all that time, would have believed that through their woods was flying a gorgeous miniature peacock? Does not this teach us to be careful not to limit our belief to our senses? Does it not also teach us that it is very possible there may be still other bright—nay, angelic beings hovering round us, though they are too pure, too radiant for our eyes to see?"

Verina turned her large dark eyes upon him; they were soft and lustrous in swimming tears, for she knew well of what angel Mr. Alford was thinking, and fearfully close was the tie the little lost Evelyn was forming between them.

Presently Verina said :

“ I have always thought that there must be angels in this beautiful world ; the flowers, and trees, and rivers, and the blue hills all seem so much too good for mankind. All nature is so pure, so peaceful, so happy, such a contrast to the weary, passion-torn human beings who walk in the midst of it, feeling often quite angry with its immovable felicity. It does not suit them, it cannot be meant for them ; but oh, how full of gladness an angel would be in such a scene as this ! ”

“ ‘ Nor think though men were worse,
That heaven would want spectators, God want
praise ;
Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth
Unseen—both when we wake and when we sleep,’ ”

repeated Mr. Alford ; adding : “ and why should not Milton be right in thus speaking ? That we do not see them is, as I said

before, no proof to the contrary, for how much that we do not see, exists around us. A hasty glance would even now lead us to decide that we are the only living things in this quiet garden. But is it so? has not every bush many inhabitants, and that long sweep of smooth, moonlit turf, is it not thronged with happy beings? I have often idly torn up a tuft of grass, and then wondered at the teeming, hitherto unsuspected, life my idle act disclosed—in every direction little ants, and beetles, and other insects go hurrying away in great alarm; but before I unroofed their habitations I had no idea upon how many fellow-creatures my hand rested. Ah, if one had but different sort of eyes! only think what a busy scene that long alley would then show. Or suppose it was made of glass! Here and there we should see smooth, long, blind-worms, and glossy-coated moles

winding in and out among the plant-roots, engaged—though they don't know why they feel inclined to take a walk—in keeping the fibres unmatted. Nearer the surface, how many happy homes we should find, where Mrs. Beetle or Madam Ant sit arranging their eggs. Then higher up still, there would be the idler people taking their enjoyment; delicate, gauzy-winged flies walking up tiny blades of dewy grass; centipedes creeping through the mosses; bees humming round the flowers; and little green caterpillars swinging by silver cords from cowslip stems—by-the-bye, everybody is asleep now, but this is the sort of busy life our little fellow-creatures carry on all day close to us, though we see little of it, and sympathise not at all in their pleasures."

"Yes, no end of life! no end of happiness!" said Verina half impatiently. "It

is as I said, everything is happy except mankind."

"I agree with you that we do not seem in harmony with the rest of creation," he answered; "but my way of solving the difficulty is different to yours. Why should not mankind learn to suit Nature, instead of giving her up as too good for them? I always think that there must be hidden somewhere a sort of philosopher's stone which would have the power of filling the valleys of dull misery, and levelling the mountains of grief, through which and over which mankind toil. This new philosopher's stone ought, in short, to be able to at least equalise our lot regarding happiness, to that of the inferior creation."

"What you have just said recalls to me that something was once described to me as more than answering your description of the needed philosopher's stone. I was

told that in religion was to be found support in *all* difficulties, consolation in *all* grief."

"That is the one subject I have never studied," replied Mr. Alford, with a half-mournful accent.

There followed once more a silence of many minutes, during which Verina gazed wistfully at the beaming stars, her heart filled with unutterable longings.

Mr. Alford broke the silence with an abrupt transition of ideas :

"I think many people unconsciously form an ideal of what would be to them perfection," he said, "and then seek all their lives long for some person who resembles and fulfils this ideal; and in this search they pass by with indifference many who are most excellent, and waste all opportunities for gaining the affection of these excellent and amiable persons

because of their unfortunate predilection for the ideal they have created in their own minds. By it they measure everybody. Some fall short in one direction, some in another ; and very seldom is the one found who corresponds fully to the image they have formed. This was, at least, my case."

"And have you never found her ?" asked Verina quite unsuspiciously.

"Yes—at last," he answered, with a sorrowful accent.

The sorrowful accent struck Verina, and with a great pity in her voice she further asked :

"And is she dead ?"

"No, my sweet, pitiful friend," said Mr. Alford. "Ah, I see what you will now ask is—why is she not my wife ?"

"No, that would not have been my first question," answered Verina, with a little

smile. "It would have been a more inquisitive one still—who is she?"

Mr. Alford was silent; then he looked up eagerly and would have spoken, but as suddenly he checked himself:

"It is a secret which I must not tell you," he said at length.

However, before the evening was over, he had betrayed his secret to her. They had returned to the house, and Mr. Alford, unremarked by the rest or by Verina, stood watching her countenance. It grieved him by its painful gravity. He came to her side and asked in a low tone:

"Would you really like to know the name of the one person who has fulfilled my ideal?"

"Yes, really," Verina replied. She spoke earnestly, but her face did not light up.

"Her name is—Verina Mordaunt."

Verina's face did light up now with a radiance of surprise and gladness.

"You *cannot* mean me," she said.

"And why not?" he asked, half smiling, and his keen gaze fixed upon her face with an expression she could not understand.

"I have learnt to believe that no one could care for me—that is why it sounds impossible," Verina answered simply, the grave look returning.

"Nay," he said, with eager tenderness; "you must not look so grave again. I betrayed my great secret solely to make you smile, if only for a moment. Do I not therefore deserve still another?"



CHAPTER VI.

“ ‘ Mystery of mysteries,
Faintly smiling Adeline,
Scarce of earth, nor all divine,
But beyond expression fair !
Wherefore those dim looks of thine,
Spiritual Adeline ?
Who talketh with thee, Adeline ? ’ ”

SO said Mr. Alford one evening in an undertone. Unheard by her, he had stepped to Verina’s side as she sat at her great work-frame ; and he now stood there looking down upon her with his peculiarly tender, half-playful smile.

Verina looked up quickly.

“ Nay, surely I am no mystery to you,” she said ; “ let me trust that you, at least, quite understand me. I am so weary of perpetual reserve that it is to me an indescribable pleasure to think there is at least one who really knows me, and to whom, therefore, I can dare to say at once, without reserve or fear of misconception, the very thoughts that rise from my heart to my lips ! So I will not for one moment believe that I am a mystery to you.”

“ I was not in earnest,” he answered. “ I trust, as you do, that in reality we can read the inmost depths of each other’s being—as should be the case in all true friendships. I was thinking of others, for to them you certainly are a mystery.”

“ At any rate, I am not one they take indescribable pains to unravel ! ” said Verina,

with a half-sad smile, as at that moment, from the other end of the room, Sir Arthur's voice rose above the talking there.

"It is they who are the losers—not you, dear friend," said Mr. Alford tenderly.

Verina answered him with one of those looks whose intense wistful gratitude always quite pained him; for the way a gentle word moved her, proved to him so sadly how much she must have yearned for gentle words.

In spite of Verina's belief that there was nothing in the minds of either that the other did not know, there was one thing concerning Mr. Alford of which she was unconscious. She did not know what were the feelings that possessed him, as he stood there looking down upon her. She did not know that he was filled with the deepest, most passionate love towards her,

and was at that moment longing to take her to his heart and shield her there from all things. She did not suspect how he was worshipping even each one of those slight, white fingers, down upon whose evolutions he was so earnestly looking; nor how hard it was seeming to him, that she could never be his when he alone loved her and could appreciate her.

And as regarded herself, Verina was also ignorant of something. She did not know why it was that to see Sir Arthur devoting himself to others no longer gave her any pain; nor why it was that in Mr. Alford's presence she felt herself a different being.

Verina saw not the abyss by whose brink she stood. Others were more clear-sighted. Lady Catherine had long cherished suspicions regarding her daughter-in-law and her distinguished guest. This

evening a slight circumstance occurred, which, in her opinion, changed these suspicions to certainties.

In the course of conversation, Lady Catherine addressing Mr. Alford began :

“Your friend, Lady Sinclair——”

“My friend?” interrupted Mr. Alford, with an accent of surprise.

“You forget,” said Amelia peevishly, “that Mr. Alford is one of those grand philosophers who consider ladies an inferior race; he would not condescend to call any lady a friend.”

Mr. Alford’s thoughts flew to the one he had just called his friend. Involuntarily his eyes turned for an instant to Verina. The same thought had made her look at him. Their eyes met, and Verina smiled a bright, quick smile. Quickly as this glance passed between them, it did not escape Lady Catherine.

Mr. Alford replied promptly to Amelia's remark :

" I despise the friendship of ladies ? I, who have the honour, pleasure, privilege, delight of Miss Amelia Mordaunt's acquaintance ? impossible ! "

Amelia did not quite know whether she ought to think him very rude, or very civil. Lady Catherine no longer doubted what she ought to think of him. That glance and that smile had spoken too plainly, she considered.

The effect of her discovery on a person of Lady Catherine's rigid propriety and reverential respect for "appearances," was, as might be imagined, petrifying. Of her son's conduct to his wife, she had never thought anything ; but that a Lady Mordaunt, of Mordaunt Hall, should forget herself and her position as Verina had apparently forgotten them, was "too shocking."

She felt that the Mordaunts would be disgraced for ever, if any one but themselves should discover what was going on. If, however, it was at once put a stop to, so that no one else might ever know anything about it, of course it would not much signify ; and Verina would be comparatively innocent : incurring the reprobation of the world, or obtaining its praise, being Lady Catherine's rendering of the words— wrong and right. Lady Catherine greatly feared that things had already gone too far thus to escape observation ; and though, through all her thoughts, there ran a secret, malicious satisfaction at Verina's having so committed herself, her consternation was really great, for even Sir Arthur could not be more jealous of the honour of the Mordaunts, than was Lady Catherine. Her fears were just. It was not she alone who had made the discovery of the too great

tenderness existing between Verina and Mr. Alford. Many of the guests were talking of it ; for the sight of one so grave and reserved as the young Lady Mordaunt bestowing on any one friendly smiles and ready answers, was likely to at once arouse suspicions.

That very next morning, as two of the guests stood in the breakfast-room, after breakfast was over and the rest dispersed, one said lightly to his companion :

“ Well, what do you think of Lady Mordaunt and Mr. Alford’s proceedings ? I never saw a more decided case in my life. I wonder at Sir Arthur’s indifference ; I should not have thought he would have let himself be made a fool of. Did you see the tender way she bent her eyes on Mr. Alford this morning, when—— ”

The speaker stopped abruptly, for he became suddenly aware that Sir Arthur

himself stood in a recess of one of the windows. Mr. Lifford's only hope was that his voice could not have penetrated all the length of that long room ; and certainly Sir Arthur continued to read his newspaper with an air of perfect indifference. Presently, however, he laid it down and left the room.

Colonel D'Aubigny looked at his companion with a significant smile.

“ To judge from the look of Sir Arthur's face, I should say you had raised a storm ; and I am thankful I am not Lady Mor-daunt.”

“ Well, really, I hope I have not done much mischief,” laughed Mr. Lifford ; “ though, perhaps, it would be amusing to witness the first act in a tragedy. Sir Arthur being now, I trust, really out of hearing, let me go on to tell you of a little adventure that happened to me yesterday,

and considerably and astonishingly opened my eyes regarding Lady Mordaunt. You know how reserved and monosyllabic she has always been to everybody; I do not think any one has ever heard her speak more than twenty words consecutively."

The Colonel nodded.

"Well, let me tell you the surprising news that she can have as much to say as any one else could. You know, too, the grave, dignified tone her voice always has; well then, fancy my surprise, when last evening, as I was walking on the terrace, I suddenly heard her voice with nothing in it of its usual calm dignity, but speaking low and quick, with a most melodious, earnest lovingness! Then, too, she seemed to have so much to say, and to say it quite eagerly! I was astonished, for, like every one else, I have always thought there was nothing in her, that she really had no

ideas. I drew nearer, and there in the garden I saw Lady Mordaunt and Mr. Alford. She was half leaning against the trunk of an elm; he was standing before her, gazing down upon her with most idolising eyes. He said something, and then she smiled—such a smile, it lit up her whole face. And you can have no idea how lovely Lady Mordaunt looks when she really smiles, for apparently Mr. Alford alone has power to make her so smile, and he, selfish man, exercises that power only in private. I cannot tell you how surprised I was at this extraordinary metamorphosis in Lady Mordaunt, at this unexpected revelation of a little of her real self. Hitherto, I have always implicitly believed the account Lady Catherine gives of her in 'strictest confidence' to every one, namely, that her taciturnity and reserve are nothing but 'dulness and temper.' That

voice and smile tell a very different tale. Ill-tempered, it is difficult to believe any one who can speak in such sweet and winning accents ; and dull, certainly no one can be whose face ever lights up with the rare intelligence that I saw flash to Lady Mordaunt's. It is altogether very mysterious. What wonderful 'open sesame' can it be that Mr. Alford has found and used ?"

Whilst Mr. Lifford thus sportively jested on the "tragedy" which was, he believed, about to rend the hearts and darken the lives of two of his fellow-creatures, Sir Arthur went with a hasty step towards Verina's room.

Before he reached it, Lady Catherine met him, and with an air of important consternation began :

" I was just looking for you," and in a lowered, eager tone, she continued : " I

wish to speak to you on a painful and shocking subject ; I beg, therefore, that you will come in here, where we shall be alone and uninterrupted."

So saying she opened the door of her own sitting-room. Sir Arthur refused to enter, saying, in the quick harsh tone that betokened no amiability of mood, that he had no time to attend to her then.

" Nothing can more deserve your time and attention than that which I consider it my painful duty to acquaint you with," said Lady Catherine, with dignified emphasis.

Sir Arthur yielded, merely protesting that she must not detain him long. When Lady Catherine had closed the door with ostentatious care and caution, and was about to speak, Sir Arthur interrupted her by saying :

" I suppose you wish to tell me what I

have long been perfectly aware of—namely, that Verina and Mr. Alford are making love to each other."

"You have judged rightly, but I am horrified to hear you speak in so light a manner of so serious and disgraceful an affair. Do you not see that such conduct as Verina's must dishonour her husband quite as much as it dishonours herself? I am petrified to find that you do not see this."

"You quite misunderstand me. I have not the slightest intention of allowing Verina to throw any disgrace on me. She has not gone far enough to do so, for no one yet knows about it with any certainty; and I will take very good care she does go no further. I shall at once put a stop to the affair. I was on my way to her when you met me."

Lady Catherine gave a sigh of relief:

"I am glad, very glad to hear you say

this, for it was fearful to think you would leave it in Verina's power to disgrace our whole family. To think of her disgusting hypocrisy, pretending her feelings would not allow her to share in what goes on, and that she liked to be alone! whilst all the time Mr. Alford has been spending every morning with her, and with him she can appear as happy as possible!"

"How do you know all this?"

"My maid has just told me, and she heard it from one of the footmen; he says that whenever he answers Verina's bell in the mornings, Mr. Alford is there reading to her and talking to her—both looking perfectly happy."

Sir Arthur looked rather contemptuous when Lady Catherine mentioned the channel through which she derived her information.

Lady Catherine continued :

“Who knows how many *friends* have shared Verina’s retirement all these years?”

“Well, at any rate Mr. Alford shall be the last,” said Sir Arthur, rising.

“Pray speak to Verina strongly. Do not be too lenient.”

Sir Arthur smiled rather sternly as he answered :

“I should not have thought experience would have lead you to fear too great leniency on my part towards Verina. Do not be afraid. I can assure you that I do not feel exactly grateful to her for her having given occasion to such insignificant creatures as Lifford and D’Aubigny to consider me weak and a fool.”

“Stay a moment, Arthur; I must tell you that Mr. Alford tells me that he is obliged to leave this for a few days. The Prime Minister wishes to appoint him to

the Spanish Embassy, and has written to request him to come and speak with him on the subject. He must, therefore, he says, leave this to-day, but as I unfortunately begged him to consider this his headquarters whilst he was in England, no doubt he will return, and what is to be done with him?"

"Mr. Alford's absence is unnecessary," said Sir Arthur haughtily. "It will be sufficient that I should speak to Verina. She will not dare to set me at defiance—at least, if she does, she shall live in my house no longer."



CHAPTER VII.

QUITE unsuspecting the coming storm, Verina meanwhile awaited Mr. Alford's customary visit. He had told her not to expect him so early as usual, but she was impatient for his coming, for she had thought of something she wished particularly to ask him. Therefore, when the door opened, she looked up quickly and eagerly. Her smile changed to a look of dismay when she saw, not Mr. Alford, but her husband enter.

“That smile was hardly meant for me,” he said sarcastically.

“No—I certainly did not expect you,” Verina answered, looking up at him with eyes whose earnest truthfulness might have disarmed suspicion.

“Whom, then, did you expect?” Sir Arthur sharply asked.

Verina was silent.

“Do you hear me speak to you, Lady Mordaunt? whom did you expect?”

“I expected Mr. Alford,” she said quietly.

“Frankness bordering on insolence,” muttered Sir Arthur, as he sat down in Mr. Alford’s chair.

“Arthur, what do you mean?” exclaimed his wife in an accent of distress.

She dreaded his harsh, rude words, and knew that anything so unheard of as a visit from him must mean something serious. What that something was, even then she did not suspect.

“Listen to me,” began Sir Arthur sternly. “I am not at all satisfied with your conduct of late, and intend to speak to you on the subject; but, first, let me assure you that you need not flatter yourself that I am in the least jealous of your affection. As you know, we both awoke long since from the delusion which unfortunately made us man and wife.”

With a look of pain, Verina involuntarily pressed one hand to her forehead.

“Pray do not favour me with any acting,” said Sir Arthur contemptuously.

“I was thinking of a longer long ago than yours—of one by the shores of the Rhine.”

She spoke low, and he went on unheedingly :

“Therefore it is not of your affection that I am jealous, but of my honour as intrusted to you.”

A glow of such indignant light came to Verina's face, she would have spoken, but Sir Arthur said :

“ Be silent, do not interrupt me. Do you suppose that your morning readings and moonlight walks with Mr. Alford have been unknown to me? As long, however, as your love-making was unremarked by others, I was indifferent to it, but now others begin to suspect it; and I warn you,” he continued fiercely, “ that if you give occasion for these suspicions to become convictions, and thus disgrace me, I will cast you off utterly and entirely, without pity or mercy. What would become of you then? you, who have neither money nor home, nor friends? you would sink into the lowest depths of degradation among the very dregs of society; you would——”

But Verina could keep silence no longer. Passionately she exclaimed :

“What right have you to insult either me or Mr. Alford by such words? Is it impossible for you even to imagine any uprightness of mind?”

Sir Arthur seemed struck by her tone of indignant innocence. He laid his hand upon her, forcing her to turn towards him and looked at her with an intent, fixed regard.

The indignant eyes bore his gaze unflinchingly.

He released her, saying coldly :

“Well, I almost believe you are innocent in intention. I almost believe you do not know that you love Mr. Alford with a greater devotion than you ever felt for me, even in the early days of our marriage.”

All the past rose up before Verina, and

in a tone of anguish, she involuntarily exclaimed :

“ No—oh no, that would be impossible.”

Unmoved by her touching words, Sir Arthur continued :

“ I, however, know more of life than you do, and I warn you that you have taken the first step to ruin, for, deny it as you may, I know that you have given all your love to a man who is not your husband—silence, Verina ! Of this I do not complain, I do not want your affection. You may give it to whom you will, as long as neither to him nor to others do you show any sign of your having done so. But if you allow *any one* to be fully aware of your sentiments, you dishonour me : and as I said before, I will then at once, and utterly, cast you off : and you will not find the world very pitiful to a dishonoured wife.”

“Your words are most cruelly unjust,” cried Verina. “You judge me by yourself: because you give to others the love that ought to be mine, you think that I do the like—but it is not true.”

“Is it not?” said Sir Arthur sneeringly. “How very much better I can read you than you can read yourself. Examine yourself and you will find that I have said the simple truth. Why are you happier since Mr. Alford came?”

“You never appeared to find out I was unhappy, till now you come to reproach me with being so no longer,” said Verina bitterly. “But do not be afraid, I am not very happy after all.”

“That is no answer to my question.”

Verina hesitated. She could not deny that Mr. Alford’s friendship had made a great difference in her life; and as she paused, the truth regarding him

began, to her great distress, to dawn upon her.

“ You cannot answer me. Well, imagine I call him out for making love to my wife : imagine fortune is on my side ; imagine you see him dead before you : would you come to me and kiss me ? ”

Verina turned pale, and in her glowing eyes he read her answer.

“ No, you would not, you would hate me,” said Sir Arthur ; and Verina knew that he spoke truly.

“ Shall I tell you what is the best protection for a wife ? ” she said at length in an altered voice—all its passionate, resentful confidence was gone. “ Her best protection is her husband’s love.”

“ Her own virtue is a better,” said Sir Arthur sternly.

“ Oh, why have you left me here all these long years without love or care ? why

did you take me from my home where I was happy and innocent?" cried Verina, with the anguish of one who shrinks with horror from the thought of the crime she had committed.

"No one can regret it more than I do," retorted Sir Arthur. He continued, "I quite see that you and Mr. Alford are suited to one another as you and I never were. It is the greatest pity in the world that you cannot marry him. You might have then philosophised and poetised to your heart's content; and I should not have the slightest difficulty in finding a wife quite to my taste. However, as things are as they are, be so good as, in future, to remember that he is not your husband and never can be."

As Sir Arthur spoke, he took up a sheet of paper that lay on the table. Verina coloured deeply as she watched him turn it

about. He looked up fixedly at her for an instant, and then tore the sheet of paper in many pieces.

"I would thank you," he said coldly, "not to draw Mr. Alford's portrait, and leave it about for the servants to comment on."

"I draw every one I can remember," she said timidly.

"Everybody, meaning, I suppose, in your vocabulary, 'Mr. Alford,' for his countenance is the only one that appeared on that sheet of paper."

Verina coloured even more deeply and painfully than before.

"And now, Lady Mordaunt, I leave you; but remember that if you make one false step, you need expect no mercy from me."

Harshly and contemptuously as Sir Arthur had spoken, his words did not leave the bitter sting they would once have left.

Wondering at this, Verina earnestly questioned herself as to the cause of her comparative and unusual insensibility ; and with bitter shame and contrition she recognised within her, as its cause, a well-spring of such deep, though trembling happiness as unrepressed could end but in misery and guilt.

Mr. Alford came at length. He saw at once that something had occurred to particularly disturb Verina, for she was absent at times, more silent than usual, and the old wistfully abstracted look was lying in her eyes. He too was ill at ease. This Spanish appointment seemed to drive him to the decision of parting from Verina. If he refused it, that would be madness, for he could not remain much longer at Mordaunt Hall. If he accepted it, he might not see Verina again for years, and the thought of leaving her here unloved, un-

cared for, was intensely painful to him. He scarcely dared to think what the consequences of a few more years of such a life would be. At one time, he had determined that before he left, he would approach the avoided subject so far, as to advise her to request a formal separation from her husband. He now felt that such a course would be unwise. If the request was refused, Verina's having made it would only expose her to fresh annoyances, and he was now convinced that the Mordaunts were not likely, voluntarily, to incur any expense, trouble, or scandal, merely for Verina's pleasure. And she had neither relatives nor friends to stand up for her, applying to her relations at Uznach being manifestly impossible. He also doubted now whether even a separation would much improve her position, for where could she go ? with whom could she live ?

In spite of these anxious and painful thoughts he tried to render the morning a pleasant one. His efforts were not very successful, the thought of their approaching separation weighed too heavily upon him; and a sense of wrong-doing now haunted Verina, and mingled itself with the pleasure she could not but feel in his companionship. Before the time came for their separating, he told her that he was obliged to go to London for a few days; that he must leave that afternoon.

“I shall not be able to see you alone again before I go, therefore let me say good-bye to you now,” he said as he rose to leave her.

A most wistful sadness came to Verina’s face, but she did not entreat him to return quickly, as she would have done the day before, in unembarrassed innocence. With the unconsciousness of her real feelings

was gone also the unembarrassment of mere friendship. She knew now how much such simple words would mean. Therefore, she did not say them. She was not influenced in this by any fear of Sir Arthur : her own native purity was of itself sufficient to make her shrink from any evil.

In a restless, unhappy mood Verina passed that afternoon and the following days, though, at times, such a gleam of gladness shot through her, as she turned from in shuddering terror. She was terrified too, at the defiant dislike she felt rising within her towards her husband. She strove to repress it, but it was difficult to do so ; and it seemed very hard that she dared not indulge in the one only source of happiness which was offered her in her cheerless existence and life unlighted by any hope.

Verina's reserve had not been unnoticed by Mr. Alford. Her wistful look had unintentionally told him all she would not say. But why would she not say it? he asked himself; was it because she also had awokened to the consciousness that it was not mere friendship which united them? He wished it might not be so, and yet the thought that she should know this was fearfully sweet to him. He felt as if he could almost sacrifice everything, all their free, sweet intercourse, all possibility of ever meeting again, for the entrancing joy of the one moment in which he might tell her how he loved her, and hear her own her love for him.

“Adieu, my pale snowdrop!” he had said to himself, as his carriage drove down the avenue. “*Mine* did I say? Good heavens, where will all this end?”



CHAPTER VIII.

A WEEK had passed. Mr. Alford had that morning returned. He had been prevented from yet seeking Verina, or exchanging more than a few words with her, by various little events which could not be conquered without a violation of his usual care to do nothing that could at all compromise Verina. To-day, he was particularly cautious, for he had remarked that whenever Verina looked at him or spoke to him, Lady Catherine watched her with a most malicious observance.

"I flatter myself, Lady Catherine, that you will find me quite as astute as yourself," thought Mr. Alford; but he was vexed and impatient at thus losing any of the hours he still could spend with Verina. They were very few, for the time of his leaving England was approaching, and only two days more could he remain at Mordaunt Hall.

He had accepted the Spanish appointment. What else, he had asked himself, was there to be done? One day, the separation must take place: every hour's delay would but render it more hard. Thus had he reasoned, and thus had he determined, at what a cost of silent suffering none but himself would ever know. But that even for Verina's sake, it was best that he should leave her, he began now fully to believe. He believed too that she felt the same; for when this

morning he had found an opportunity of privately telling her his decision, though Verina had grown very white as she listened, she had made no remonstrance by either word or look or tone.

A few hours later, Amelia went to the library where Lydia sat making scarlet rosettes for her horse. She threw herself into an arm-chair opposite her sister, and with a little laugh began :

“My dear Lydia, you should have been with us a few minutes ago; you would have had a most amusing piece of excitement. You would have seen Arthur in one of his furies.”

“What about? with whom?” asked Lydia rather anxiously.

“Oh, with Verina,” Amelia answered in a tone of the greatest nonchalance. “He had just come in from riding, and you can

imagine the result of Arthur's being angry with any one, and having a riding-whip in his hand!"

Lydia dropped her work, and raised her face one glow of indignation.

"You do not mean that he struck her!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, many times, and without mercy," said Amelia carelessly.

"Where is Verina?" Lydia further demanded.

"I am sure I can't say; I only know that she has just rushed past me like a flash of lightning, looking certainly wildly beautiful with those dark eyes of hers gleaming like diamonds."

Lydia rose quickly up, flinging with a vehement hand the rosettes and ribbons on the table.

"You and Arthur are perfect monsters!" she cried. "It is a disgrace to be re-

lated to you ; and I am horrified to think that once I was nearly as bad as you are !”

She swept out of the room ; and Amelia threw herself back in her chair, laughing her little affected laugh.

The next moment she discovered that Lydia had not been her only auditor. Unnoticed by her, and unremembered by Lydia, Mr. Alford sat reading at the other end of the room.

Amelia did not feel quite comfortable at this discovery ; she began to wish that at least she had not laughed, and to wonder what Mr. Alford would think of the information she had so unintentionally given him ; but presently she began to hope that he had not heard their conversation, for he did not address her, and he looked so perfectly unmoved.

Lydia had hastened to Verina’s dressing-

room. The door was locked, and no answer was returned to her request for admittance. But Lydia persisted. Again and again she knocked, and in her gentlest tones, entreated Verina to let her speak to her, if for one moment only. No answer, no sound was audible. Still Lydia waited many minutes, hoping that after all Verina would admit her ; for "she was always," Lydia remembered with a pang, "so gentle, so willing to forgive."

At length Lydia saw it was hopeless, and she turned sadly away.

"She thinks me still as atrocious as the rest," thought Lydia with a sigh ; "and no wonder she does think so. She little knows how bitterly I regret what I have helped to do. Oh, how could Arthur be so cruel to her!"



CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Verina reached her room, almost maddened by the insult her husband had offered her in the presence of others, she threw herself down upon the sofa in a paroxysm of tearless, voiceless, passionate grief. Another instant passed, and she had sprung again to her feet. Her eyes were still flashing like diamonds, and now a scarlet spot glowed on each cheek. With trembling hands and hurried movements she gathered together one or two of her most treasured possessions—threw

a shawl round her. Then suddenly she paused, pushed the things from her, flung the shawl upon the ground, wrung her hands with a gesture of despairing wretchedness, and once more threw herself down upon the sofa. She had thought to leave, for ever, the hated house, and its hated inhabitants; to steal away in that grey twilight, and never be heard of more. But as she prepared for flight, the consciousness of the utter madness of such a step forced itself upon her. Alas ! how could she go forth alone into the cold world—she, who had no means of even bare subsistence, nor spirit, nor strength to earn it ? what could it be but to go forth to die of want, or to sink down amongst the lowest of mankind ? Before her remembrance had arisen the forlorn, wan faces, the squalid dresses of the outcasts, who wander through the

London streets, and at whom she had, from her carriage window, often looked with a pity so deep, as to excite the ridicule of her companions. "What could her fate be," she thought, "but to become one of those homeless, want-devoured wretches?" and already, in imagination, she saw herself standing at the corner of the glaring street, cold winds piercing her worn, tattered garments, hard faces staring at her, and the contemptuous hand of a policeman forcing her from her station.

No wonder was it that as this vision arose before the refined, delicately nurtured Verina, she had flung the shawl from her, and sunk down there again, daring no longer to think of flight, though almost maddened by this realisation of her impotency and helplessness. Bell after bell had rung, but Verina neither heeded

them, nor the possible consequences of such inattention ; nay, she almost exulted in the thought of thus angering her oppressors, for her whole gentle nature was changed, and filled only with fiercest hatred.

Presently there came a knock at her door. Though Verina knew whose it was, she took no notice of it. When, however, it was followed by an imperative order for admittance, the instinct of a long obedience prevailed. She rose and unlocked the door.

“ What is the meaning of this ? how much longer do you wish to keep every one waiting ? ” demanded Sir Arthur.

A fierce, sullen light flashed to Verina’s face, as she briefly answered that she intended to dine in her own room.

“ Indeed ! ” was the contemptuous reply, as Sir Arthur rang her bell violently. “ I

suppose you wish people to believe that you are too overcome by the thought of Mr. Alford's approaching departure, to appear. I do not." As the maid hurried into the room, he said : " Dress Lady Mor-dau nt as quickly as possible. We shall wait for you," he continued to Verina, adding in a threatening tone, but aside to her, so that the maid could not hear him. " Remember I will not be trifled with."

And then Sir Arthur strode out of the room.

No longer daring to think of resistance, vanquished, humbled, Verina covered her face in her hands and wept bitterly and unrestrainedly, whilst the wondering maid brushed her lady's long, fair hair. It was so terrible to her, that there was no alternative but to submit in silence to such insults, such oppression.

How that evening passed Verina never knew. She did not even observe how excited Mr. Alford appeared. No one, however, but Verina failed to remark the restless excitement which possessed him. All remarked this, and that on Lady Mordaunt's face, whence every sign of emotion was usually so carefully banished, there were now evident traces of most bitter weeping, and that in her every word and movement there was the tone and air of one goaded almost beyond endurance, and quite beyond any respect for the observation of others. The wondering guests noticed also, that even Sir Arthur, contrary to his wont, so far forgot the maintenance of "appearances" as to cast frequent sharp and furious glances at his wife—glances which Lady Mordaunt totally disregarded.

At length every one had retired to their

rooms, and Verina stepped out alone on to the broad stone terrace, into the still night, which was bright only with the light of stars. In the revulsion of freedom from that long restraint, she raised her white arms and clasped hands with a wild gesture of grief, and then they fell powerless by her side, and she sank down there on the stones, leaning her forehead against the rough cold balustrade, whilst a burst of laboured, passionate sobs shook her slight frame. There seemed to her, nothing before but a long life of degradation and misery.

“Verina, my own Verina!” said a voice, and gently strong, loving arms raised her and clasped her to a wildly beating heart.

Verina trembled excessively, but she made no effort to release herself from that tender embrace, but rested quietly within

it, weeping more freely now, in the great relief and softening brought by the presence of the only one who loved and pitied her.

“ I will use no further concealment,” Mr. Alford continued ; “ I love you more than words can say. If you were happy, I would, whatever it might have cost me, have left this place, and never told you this—never seen you more, but your wretchedness is beyond my endurance. Verina, I must save you—there is but one way. You must leave Mordaunt Hall, with me, this very hour. Sir Arthur will at once desire and obtain a divorce, and then, *then* you may be my wife. Oh, blessed thought. And not blessed for me only, but for you also, my Verina, I trust. At least, it will be if my adoration and the devotion of my life can make it so. Oh, trust in me then ! trust in me and come with me, and never

again shall any insult reach you. Oh, listen to me, my Verina!"

"I dare not, I dare not—for it would be sin to leave him," faltered Verina, shuddering; and yet lingering, with a wild tumult in her heart of love, and dread, and longing.

"Sin! yes, in the eyes of men it will be so, but not really—not in the sight of Heaven, for in the sight of Heaven the mere flying from this wretchedness cannot be nearly so great a sin as hating your husband, as you must soon hate him if you remain here. You need not fear this, nor need you fear that the world will point at you with disdain. We will go to a foreign country where no one will know your history. We will never return to England, and even if we did, none should ever dare to breathe one word against my wife."

Passionately he thus pleaded, assuring her again and again that no scorn should ever assail her; that he would henceforth shield her from every faintest breath of care or grief, and picturing to her the perfect happiness that would in future be hers, telling her how she would be the idol of his life, the companion in his every pursuit, the sharer of his every thought. And, at length, almost inaudibly, Verina whispered her assent—the fatal assent that rendered her an outcast.

“Take me then, but have patience with me, and let me rest, for I am worn out with strife and sorrow,” and like a tired child she laid her head upon his breast.

“Yes, dearest, nothing but peace and rest henceforth all your life long,” he answered fervently. “Never shall you regret your trust in me. And in time,” he continued with earnest tenderness, “in

time, will not the old, bright Verina return?"

"Perhaps," answered Verina, with a faint, unhopeful smile. "But I do not think that I have strength left ever to grasp happiness again. Peace—rest—is all I long for; and long for them I do, with an indescribable longing."

Then a sudden dread flashed over her, and she went on hurriedly :

"But you—you *will* be true to me ? for if you are not, what will become of me ?"

"Oh, Verina, Verina ! can you doubt me ?"

The accent of gentle, sorrowful reproach quieted her fear.

In a low, terrified murmur she went on :

"There seems nothing around me but darkness and madness except when I think of you. You are the one only calm, clear

thought in my existence. When I think of you, it is as if I saw one space of light in the otherwise utter darkness which surrounds me. How then can I turn away and say you shall not save me? Oh, may Heaven forgive me, but I have not strength for that!"

Hot tears fell on the golden hair that waved down upon his shoulder.

"My own Verina," he said, "it would break my heart to listen to you, did I not know that soon, very soon you will think and feel so differently.

"Let us lose no more of these precious minutes," he continued. "Everything is already arranged, my carriage is waiting; it needs but for you now, at once, to leave this hateful place.

He would have gently led her from the terrace; but Verina suddenly drew back and exclaimed :

“ My child !—I cannot leave him. I could not bear never to see his face again. He must go with me wherever I go ; oh, wait one moment whilst I fetch him.”

Mr. Alford attempted to dissuade her. He knew Sir Arthur would never allow her to retain the child, and he dreaded the chances of discovery which would arise, if Verina returned to the house : but at his first words her agitation was so great, that he dared not attempt further opposition. It was in an agony of suspense that he waited during Verina’s absence, but she returned to him in safety. She was muffled now in a thick veil and heavy cloak, and in her arms she bore her sleeping child ; and as in silence they went towards the carriage, she clasped him closer and still closer to her heart.

Then swiftly and for ever, Verina was

borne away from the home to which eight years ago she had come, an innocent and happy bride, sitting beside her husband, and ignorant alike of sorrow or of sin.

Swiftly the carriage rolled on past the village ; past the ivy-grown church, within whose walls, dead, in her young, fresh innocence, lay little Evelyn Mordaunt ; past the gateway, glimmering white in the moonlight, that led to the downs, and to the peaceful Grange ; on and on, through the pleasant Berkshire lanes and the still night —bearing Verina—oh, whither ?

The mood of confiding tenderness had forsaken Verina. Now that it was too late to retrieve the fatal step which she had taken in an hour of desperation, she seemed horror-stricken at what she had done. Silent and trembling she leant back, gazing with fixed, unseeing eyes on the dim out-

line of the hedgerow-trees flashing past them in the darkness.

Mr. Alford watched her with an expression of anxiety. The white, fixed look of suffering made his heart ache, but he cheered himself with the belief that it was but a passing pang—one that would be fully repaid by the bright future which was, he trusted, before her. He let himself sink into a happy reverie, picturing to himself how he would ever guard and shield her from the faintest shadow of care or sorrow, when once she was his wife ; and how soon, then, beneath his unfailing love, the sad face would learn to smile once more, and the quiet voice to ring again with its old, quick music. On these thoughts Mr. Alford dwelt with a tenderness, to feel which was rapture to him, for he had never known such

before; and it was also rapture to him to realise that now for the first time in his existence another's life, and that other's Verina's, was bound up in his.



CHAPTER X.

THE affair of the divorce would, Mr. Alford believed, detain them some little time in England. Therefore he went at once to London. He chose lodgings for Verina in an humble and obscure part of the town, for he dreaded her being exposed to the pain of accidentally meeting any of her former acquaintances, before a divorce should have given him the right to guard her as his wife. He believed that she would be here least likely to incur such a trial.

He went with her to these lodgings, and

as he accompanied her into the humble sitting-room, he whispered in sudden alarm :

“ Verina, for my sake, do not look so despairingly.”

It was as though there was a spell upon her ; she could not speak, - but she looked at him and smiled such a wan, sad, tender smile.

In these lowly lodgings Mr. Alford strove in every way to cheer her. Every argument that could be brought to console her he used, assuring her by every possible sophistry that she had done no wrong ; and imploring her to resist, for his sake, the remorse that already weighed so heavily upon her.

And in his presence she did endeavour to at least appear cheerful, and she was happy with the peace of exhaustion when she leant her head upon his shoulder, and

felt his kisses on her brow and hands. But the fever of mind which preyed upon her, bringing a glow to her cheek which Mr. Alford, she trusted, believed to be the glow of health, wore away her strength.

During his absences she could settle to nothing, but would wander from room to room restlessly, trying to fly from her ever-tormenting conscience.

It seemed to her, perhaps justly, that every one guessed her history and scorned her. Even the look of a passing stranger she could not bear, and she grew to fancy a knowing, contemptuous familiarity in every word that was spoken to her.

One day whilst Mr. Alford was absent, a conversation between the woman of the house and a stranger forced itself upon her hearing. The voice that spoke was a loud, cheerful woman's voice, with

an accent in it of unmistakable vulgarity.

“Yes, landlady,” said this voice, “it is very true, the rooms are tidy and large enough as my husband here could tell you, if he did not always leave me to do everything.”

Thus invoked a man’s voice echoed her opinion, and the woman began again :

“But there is one thing I must know, for I am particular about the company I keep. Just tell me what sort of people the other family are ; I have heard strange stories about them.”

“It is only a lady and a little boy,” said the landlady hesitatingly.

“Not much of a lady according to my story ! Now, landlady, you may as well tell me the truth, for I should find it out before I was in the house a week.”

The landlady's prudence gave way before her love of gossip.

"The lady is married," she said, "for she wears a wedding ring; but that the gentleman who is always coming to see her, is not her husband, I know to my certain knowledge, and I'll tell you how. My girl, Betsy, was just waiting a bit outside the lady's door one day, when the gentleman was there, and she heard them talking of the lady's husband—the poor gentleman!—and from what they said, Betsy made out that they had run away together."

Words followed between the two women that made Verina shiver, and her blue eyes grow large and fixed in her anguish of shame.

"Well, I never!" the loud woman's voice ended indignantly; "well, you may tell her from me, that no honest woman

will come into this house whilst she stays here ! Perhaps that, may be, would make her feel a little what she's done for herself ; but such creatures are always as brazen-faced and hardened as they are wicked."

Brazen-faced and hardened ! whilst in an agony of shame and grief and vain repentance, Verina sank down upon the floor, trying to shut out from her the sound of that harsh voice ; but not daring to close her door lest those without should guess how the arrow of their cruel words had sped home. It was not only the contemptuous scorn of those words that so moved her, but what seemed to her their bitter truth, and the realisation that coarse-minded men and women had now the right to speak of her thus—a byword, and a mark for scorn was she become ; and

Verina wrung her hands and cried out in her anguish.

Mr. Alford watched her with great anxiety. More than once he said to himself :

“ Except as her husband, I can do her no good—but only harm.”

Day by day he too became graver; and one day it struck Verina that he no longer expressed so much tenderness as at first. Alas! Mr. Alford had only too good reason to look careworn, and to endeavour gently to wean Verina from him. Sir Arthur resolutely and absolutely refused to consent to a divorce; his love of vengeance conquering even his love for Lady Millicent. His every reply to all communications was to this effect. In vain Lady Catherine urged him to accede to Mr. Alford’s proposal.

“ I will never do so,” he answered

fiercely. "She shall not have his name to shield her guilt. She shall remain my wife, and thus learn to regret the disgrace she has brought upon me. I know her well enough to be sure that her life will be one long remorse."

Sir Arthur took immediate legal steps to deprive Verina of the care of his son, and then desired that everything which had belonged to her should be burnt, or otherwise destroyed; and that her name should never be again mentioned in his presence.

And very soon the remembrance of the fair young stranger who had come so suddenly amongst them, and as suddenly disappeared, faded from the minds of most in Berkshire. Only in some few of the humble homes whose wants her gentle hand had relieved, that gentleness was long remembered. There, for long after,

in quiet twilight hours, the elders would tell of the sweet-spoken lady, who once, in the years gone by when they were young, lived at the Hall ; but even they spoke of her in low, sad, mysterious tones, as of one who had deeply fallen.



CHAPTER XI.

ONE day Mr. Alford came to Verina's lodgings, and with an agitation which he vainly endeavoured to conceal, he said that he found it necessary to leave London for a day.

"Try and be happier in my absence than in my presence," he added tenderly.

Then he caught her hands in his and gazed long and passionately upon her, and then rushed from the room. Verina was a little startled by his manner, but in no

way suspected its deep and painful meaning.

Next morning, the rough untidy maid-of-all-work thrust a letter into Verina's hand. It was from Mr. Alford, and was dated the evening before.

MR. ALFORD'S LETTER.

“For days I have been striving to nerve myself to tell you what this letter must now convey to you, for I find that it is impossible to bring myself to witness your anguish, or to allow you to witness mine.

“Verina, we must part. Sir Arthur solemnly declares that nothing shall ever induce him to consent to a divorce. Therefore, you can never be my wife, and therefore, alas ! alas ! there remains for us nothing but to part; for I see you could not face the world's scorn, and the self-

reproach that would otherwise be yours. I see that they would kill you. I would gladly defy all consequences except this one, but to watch you thus fade away before my eyes, I could not endure. Therefore, for the sake of both, part we must.

“ How cold and calm these words look ! How little sign do they convey of the heart-rent anguish which possesses me ! but anguish beyond my description does possess me ; for it is a thought almost beyond my endurance, that in seeking to save you, I have, perhaps, but plunged you deeper in misery. Oh, Verina, forgive me, forgive me ! You know that I would give my life for you. You know that it is not my fault—that the best, the only kindness, which is left for me to show you, is thus to leave you. But I will not speak of my love for you. I realise now, that I sinned

in even thinking of you—the wife of another—for if it was not sin, why is this fearful retribution come upon us?

“My one ray of comfort is, my conviction that Sir Arthur’s decision must be prompted by the wish to be merciful, and to repair the past. In this conviction, I am strengthened by a friend of Sir Arthur’s, who has lately seen him, and whom I believe to speak with secret authority from Sir Arthur. And his friend assures me, that if this is indeed Sir Arthur’s wish, the more speedily I leave you, the more completely I separate from you, the more will he be softened. Therefore, in this hope, in this belief, and without venturing to take upon me to arrange anything for you, I sail to-morrow from England, perhaps for ever.

“If I have rightly solved the meaning of Sir Arthur’s apparently strange de-

cision, oh, forget me, my beloved, and be happy.

“ As for myself, my peace is gone and cannot return; but Heaven grant I have not sinned beyond forgiveness.

“ HUGH ALFORD.”

Unperceived by Verina, the envelope contained a second enclosure. This enclosure empowered her to obtain what money she required, and entreated her to make full use of the power.

Mercy from Sir Arthur! Verina knew better!

An hour later the rough maid-of-all-work stamped again into the room and demanded :

“ Is the gentleman coming to dinner to-night, marm ?”

No answer was returned. Motionless,

and white, and cold, "the lady" still stood beside the window, in the self-same spot and attitude as when, an hour before, the letter had been put into her hand. The only difference was, that now the letter itself lay at her feet as though escaped from the languid, nerveless grasp of her clasped and drooping hands. The dull vacant gaze she at length turned on the startled girl made her hastily retire, thinking to herself "the lady must have had uncommon bad news in that letter, yet there wasn't a black seal to it."

When she next ventured into the room, on the plea that her mistress had sent her to pull down the blinds, lest the light should spoil the carpet, the only change she found there was, that the lady had sunk upon the sofa, her face hidden in her white hands, and she herself, all unheed-

ing and unhearing the happy murmur of the little child who had crept to a footstool beside her and was now busy making strange playthings out of the letter which had brought upon his mother such dark despair.

There was again no answer to anything the girl said; no reply to her offer of luncheon, no notice of her carrying off the boy with her, that he might receive from the landlady the attention which his mother seemed incapable of bestowing on him.

It was evening, the room was dark, and the lamps burnt like stars along the hushed, dreary streets, when Verina awoke from that long trance. Slowly she raised herself and looked round the bare, cheerless room with a dull gaze of stony misery, awakening, as she did so, to a fuller consciousness of the darkness, the

ruin, the utter desolation which had come upon her. She felt giddy beneath this load of misery, which she knew none could ever share with her, for she fully realised that she was henceforth *alone* with her disgrace in the relentless world. She fully realised that henceforth all that was pure would shrink from her, that only that which was vile would be willing to receive her. And, oh, worse than all, she dared not pray—dared not even wish for death, that best hope of the wretched—those hastily written words, “sinned beyond forgiveness,” having fastened on her mind with fearful power. Hitherto, in all her sorrows she had, at least, been innocent.

So great was the horror with which these thoughts oppressed her, that only one slight thread of reason saved her now from the madness which she could almost

feel creeping over her, and which she did not fear, for it would, she thought, bring at least oblivion.

Sorrow does not often kill, otherwise than slowly, or Verina could hardly have borne the hours that followed without sinking beneath them.

The only thing during these long hours which she did in any way showing she retained her consciousness, was, that once she rose, and slowly and with apparent difficulty smoothed out the crushed letter beneath her wan, trembling hands ; and then with the same apparent difficulty read it once more from beginning to end, slowly mastering each word. When she had finished it, with a low bitter wail she sank down again upon the hard, horsehair sofa, murmuring :

“ If even he forsakes me, who else will have pity for me ? ”

No illusions remained to her. She could feel glad now, when she remembered that her father was in his grave; he was spared the anguish of knowing what his daughter had become.

Thus many days passed. She had still some money left, but what was to become of her when that was spent, she knew not and dared not think. The vision which had arisen before her in her room at Mordaunt Hall was perpetually before her now, appalling her with its haggard fearfulness, for would it not soon be realised? were not want and sin close upon her footsteps now?

Day after day passed thus. At length there came to her the thoughts of home, of Rüdisheim. That very hour she rose up from her prostration of despair.

“I will go home; perhaps Gretchen lives there still,” she thought, and with feverish haste departed.



CHAPTER XII.

RÜDISHEIM once more! It was in the golden evening hours that, after several days' journey, Verina reached this, her long unseen native place. Years had apparently brought to it no change. The same calm, dreamy life she had left there, greeted her now; and peaceful, as of old, looked the little town this quiet, golden-lit evening, with the sunbeams flickering over its white-paved, pleasant street; and with its ancient, gabled roofs and quaint chimney-stacks standing out from a sky whose

deep azure was flecked only by soft, white, slowly-gliding summer clouds. As of old, white-breasted swallows were chasing one another up and down that long, bright, pleasant street, their sharp voices ringing in the clear and balmy air, and answered by the clattering of stork bills against the red roof tiles, whereon those monarchs of Rüdisheim contentedly sunned themselves in the mellow evening beams. Here and there a rosy child was sitting on a white scrubbed doorstep, and maidens as rosy were stepping briskly by, carrying lofty burdens on their erect heads, and in their faces all the sunny good-humour and contentment Verina had remembered and missed so long in England. These children and happy girls seemed all the life stirring now in Rüdisheim. In the evening time there never was much more astir, the good Rüdisheimers taking life

quietly as ever, but the stillness of the place was very striking to the long-absent eyes that gazed upon it now.

And thus had the sun shone, and the swallows skimmed up and down peaceful Rüdisheim, and the dreamy storks gazed into it, and the little children played upon its doorsteps, and the happy maidens and their *Bürschen* gone blithely up and down every summer-time, since Verina went away! Yes, thus had the quiet days gone quietly on in her peaceful native town, all these years whilst far away in England, Verina drained her bitter cup of life!

Tears, soft, human tears came now to the eyes of the long-absent Verina, the fallen wife, the outcast, as she stood and gazed upon it all, listening to the old familiar sounds, looking with heart-yearnings on the old familiar things. They

seemed to waft her back again to her innocent and happy girlhood ; for the whole atmosphere of the place seemed impregnated still with the gladness with which she used to look upon it, and to give her back, at least, a remembrance of how it felt to be young, and glad, and innocent. Verina had long forgotten this. Now it all came back to her. And as she thus vividly recalled the past, side by side with and uninfluencing its bitter woe, there sank down upon her heart a strange ecstatic rapture. Before these tender memories even the hard, fierce despair which possessed her, melted into a softer though not less hopeless mood ; and vague yearnings arose within her towards that long-forgotten self, and brought a gentler dimness over the wild brilliancy of her eyes.

Down the street came a blue-frocked, blue-eyed boy, singing cheerily. It was a

simple verse he sang, but it thrilled Verina's heart to hear it, for it moved her with a mighty force, thus once again to listen to the accents of her native tongue, and, oh! how often, when she too was a child, had she heard other blue-eyed children sing that very song!

Strange, most strange did it seem to Verina thus again to listen to familiar words, thus to find all things so unaltered whilst she was herself so changed—little of the Verina of former girlish years being left in her, who had gone away so full of ardent life and love—only to return worn out with long years of grief, o'erwhelmed by remorse and shame.

When the clear boy voice had died away down the street, Verina roused herself from that reverie of mingled pain and gladness. She walked on till she reached the door of her old home. How unchanged

did it also look! The very weeds Verina used to cherish when a child were still growing in the worn doorstep ; and the self-same swallow nests that used to cluster there, were clustering still beneath the broad eaves. The only visible change was that the vine was waving far above her window now.

Verina's heart sank as she rang the well-remembered bell. There was no sign of life in the silent house, and there came over her a great dread lest the one refuge that she had come so far to seek, should after all be unattainable. No answer came to her summons. Again she rang, waiting with heart-sick dread. At length steps drew near, the door was slowly unlocked and opened, and in the doorway stood Gretchen herself—the very same Gretchen that had wept over her and blessed her when she went out a bride

from that door, eight unhappy years ago. Yes, the very self-same Gretchen, dressed in all her wonted Dutch-like neatness, her snowy cap, snowy as of old, and the pleasant face within it, full of its old querulous kindness.

But now Gretchen, looking full in the stranger's face, said sharply :

" You have mistaken the house. Nobody wants you here, for nobody lives here now."

So saying she would have slammed the door to again, but Verina held out her hand to her :

" Do you not know me, Gretchen ?" she said, in her low, mournful voice.

Gretchen started at the sound of that voice. With the dawning of a tremulous astonishment she gazed long upon the stranger's face. Then suddenly her whole countenance lit up, her knitting

dropped to the ground, tears fell down her cheeks, and she caught Verina's hands in hers, covering them with tears and kisses and sobbing out her surprise, her welcome, her delight. Quite overcome did the poor faithful Gretchen seem. She wept and laughed by turns, talking with an incoherence of unutterable gladness, through which incoherent words nothing was very distinguishable but her unclouded delight to see again "her sweet lady—her darling child."

Verina was too spirit-broken to be moved, as she would once have been, by these long-missed words of tenderness; but even now they sank down upon her bruised and weary heart, softly, healingly, as snow-flakes fall. A languid gladness stole over her. Still she could only clasp Gretchen's hand in hers, and look upon her in a tender silence.

“ Oh, my sweet lady, how many years it is since you went away from me!” sobbed Gretchen. “ But how can I keep you standing here! You must be weary; come in, dear lady, and rest and refresh yourself,” and hurriedly did Gretchen lead the way into the only now occupied room.

It was the low, [pleasant, stone-paved kitchen. The evenings were chilly still, so the stove was blazing and open. Its glowing fire giving out a cheerful light that glanced from long rows of burnished pans and kettles on to the broad hearth-stone, making the little room look so bright and home-like, spite of its humbleness.

Gretchen drew forth a great wooden chair for Verina, and knelt beside her, chafing the cold hands and sobbing again in her delight. And as Verina rested thus, a slow, faint smile came to her lips—the

first that had been there for many a day.

How or why Verina had come back mattered not to the simple, loving Gretchen. She asked no questions, for she cared for nothing but to know that her lady was by her side once more. Besides, she would not for the world have troubled Verina with inquiries that might, perchance, give pain. Her tears, indeed, flowed perhaps the faster because the sweet face, on which she seemed never tired of gazing, was so thin, so changed, so wan; still she did not ask what had thus changed it, but comforted herself with the belief, that whatever it might be, her "dear lady" could not fail to soon, very soon, get well and happy here in her old home.

"And see, my baby," said Verina, speaking with a peaceful languidness. "He, too, will live here with us for a time."

Verina sighed as she said the last words, for she knew that the time in which she might still retain him was very brief. Gretchen took the boy from his mother's arms and gazed on him in an ecstasy of pride and gladness. She could not enough admire his bold, bright looks, she only regretted that she could trace so little likeness to his mother in the brown eyes that looked so fearlessly in hers.

When, at length, the good Gretchen was grown more composed, she related, at Verina's request, the history of Count Rodolph's last days.

"He grew very altered before he died," said Gretchen. "He grew not to look so stern and grave, and seemed to like to speak even to me. Especially he was never tired of hearing about you, and would like to listen for hours to accounts of what you did and said when you were a child;

though, in those days, he never noticed you much. Nor used he formerly to smile, but in his illness he often smiled, and would thank me so gently for any little thing I did. It seemed to me as if he had never been so happy as now, when he knew he was dying. He had his couch moved to the window and would lie there, looking out on the Rhine, with such a peaceful look on his face. There was no sternness and little sadness left in it now. He made me hang the picture you were painting when you left, St. Stephen I think he called it—he made me hang it on the wall, where he could always see it from his couch, and his eyes were resting on it just before he fell asleep—I mean before he died ; but it was such a peaceful death that it was more like sleep than anything else." Gretchen's voice faltered again, and she hastily brushed away a tear.

It did Verina good to have her thoughts thus turned, if even for a little, from the darker griefs that possessed her, to the peaceful sadness lingering round the memory of her father. It did her good too, to find that after all, there was at least one who would never shun her, outcast though she was.



CHAPTER XIII.

 LL night long the tempest may have raged around a fated ship, but often the wild winds are lulled, and deepest tranquillity is resting on the late so stormy ocean, ere the wrecked vessel sinks beneath the greedy waves. A like fate is Verina's. Most tranquil is the haven in which is to be passed the brief remainder of her storm-tossed life.

She realises this with a languid gladness, and feels no longer friendless. All is outward peace around her now. Only

in her own heart is that peace now wanting: and even its pain and self-reproach are soothed by the sight of the familiar, kindly face that watches over her. But that pain can never be really banished: nothing can really take from her the consciousness of sin, the self-reproach that, as her husband in his relentless wrath desired, are wearing her life away.

Gretchen dotes on the fair haired, merry boy, and in the evenings when all her work is done, she delights in having him on her lap. Then she talks to him, and she plays with him, just as she used, long ago, to play with his young mother, when she, too, was a fair-haired, innocent child.

The faintest, faintest smile comes to that young mother's languid, wasted face, as she watches them; for Gretchen's

pleasant countenance and the little, low, sunny room look so home-like, so great a contrast to the grand saloons of Mordaunt Hall, whose cold splendour so chilled her, as the scene of constant insult and unkindness. Yes, Verina feels that she has found a tender refuge. It is quite strange to her to realise this, and that all the turmoil and the battle of her life are for ever passed. Yet passed they are. No more harsh words and harsh looks, no more jarring, no more daily fretting annoyances will Verina ever know again. Nothing but love and peace can ever reign in this quiet house, where the only face that looks understandingly on Verina's is the sunny kindly face of Gretchen; and where, often, the only sounds that break the hour-long stillnesses are the chirping of the crickets, and the drowsy ticking of the clock, or the happy

murmur of the baby Arthur—his father's image.

The peace and tranquil silence thus brooding all day long in that quiet house are most grateful to Verina's strife-worn spirit and breaking heart. In time, so tender a tranquillity might perhaps have even restored the overwrought spirits and healed the breaking heart, but for the ceaseless upbraiding of her conscience, the gnawing remorse for the fatal step which no effort of hers can retrieve. Still Verina is very tranquil now. Quietly and uncomplainingly she sits for hours at Gretchen's great spinning-wheel: the mechanical employment, and the dreamy buzz of the flying wheel are very soothing to her. She seldom speaks, but has ever a slow tender smile ready with which to answer Gretchen's goings and comings and loving words, and she likes to watch

Gretchen bustling about at her household work ; she likes to hear Gretchen's cherry voice singing softly to herself. And Gretchen is always singing, for she is so blithe at heart, now that her child is come home to her. This blitheness would have faded, did she notice how day by day Verina's strength declines. But Gretchen does not notice this—perhaps because she is wilfully blind. It is not the less true.



CHAPTER XIV.

GT had long seemed to Verina that if she could obtain but one word of forgiveness from her husband, the remorse which devoured her might be stilled. This longing for his forgiveness grew at length so overpowering that one day, during Gretchen's absence, she roused herself from her langour and addressed to Sir Arthur a brief but most pathetic letter. She had not long to wait for a reply. Many days had not passed before Gretchen entered her room saying exultingly :

“A letter for you, dear lady!”

Verina knew well from whom it must come, and with great emotion received it, and recognised her husband’s writing. Thought is quick as lightning, and even as she tore it open there flashed confusedly through her mind a remembrance of the delight with which during one of his short absences in the first year of their marriage she had received a letter from him. Now with what heart-sinking dread, and yet with what longing, did she do so!

Another moment and it had fallen from her hands; she never wept now, or she would have shed burning tears of bitter shame and disappointment. Within the envelope there was only her own returned unopened, with on it, in Sir Arthur’s clear, decided writing, the brief stern remark:

“No communications of any kind will be received.”

The fiercest upbraiding could not have conveyed Sir Arthur's meaning so forcibly as those cold, stern words. None others could have so plainly expressed how utterly and for ever he had cast away from him his fallen wife; none others could so plainly have told her that to whatever depths of misery she might be forced, from him there would be no pity, no relenting, no forgiveness; and none others could have made her so fully realise how deeply she had sunk.

From that hour she grew even to shrink from her boy's caresses. When Gretchen wonderingly remarked this, she answered shuddering :

“ He is too innocent for me to touch him.”



CHAPTER XV.

IN the dim, faint light of scarcely breaking morning, a slight figure comes to the sleeping Gretchen's side, and wild words startle Gretchen from her rest :

“ I am dying ! oh, save me, save me ! do not let me die ! ” and the thin, wasted arms of her foster-child are thrown convulsively around her. “ Oh, save me ! ” Verina cries again, in that agony of dread. “ I know that I am dying—dying fast, and I have sinned beyond forgiveness ! ”

In a moment Gretchen had subdued her first affright at Verina's strange language, and thought only of soothing her.

"Hush, mein Herz," she said tremulously. "Do not fear, you are not strong and so you fancy things, but you shall get well, quite well, my darling."

With many such tender assurances she sought to calm Verina's terrible agitation, but it was long before she could do so in any degree.

She had, Verina said, been lying long awake, and then all at once the conviction that she was dying came over her; she could not bear the terror of the thought alone, and had risen and dressed and sought Gretchen. She was trembling still. Gretchen at length prevailed on her to lie down again, but even then she would only consent to this if Gretchen

would promise not to leave her ; a human voice and face seeming to her some protection.

A dim lamp was swinging from the centre of the roof in Verina's low, ancient oak-lined room. The faint light it threw gleamed from grotesque carved heads, and scrolls of oaken flowers, on to Verina's wasted face, and the white transparent hand that held Gretchen's in a convulsive grasp of terror and supplication. And Gretchen felt a sudden awe, as by its dim light she looked upon that wasted face and transparent hand, for as she did so the conviction that Verina judged but too truly, forced itself upon her.

"Do not leave me," murmured the pale lips. "You are my only friend."

The tears came fast to Gretchen's eyes.

Again and again, in the long dark dreary

hours, those paroxysms of terror shook Verina's wasted form. Nothing had power to calm her. In broken words, to which Gretchen had no clue, she referred to the past, and murmured that she could expect no mercy, dared not hope, and yet must die. Could her husband have witnessed that terrible remorse and fear, even he must have owned he was sufficiently avenged.

"I know how it is," said Gretchen falteringly; "they have been cold and cruel to you in that foreign country, and if they have driven you to do wrong the sin is theirs, not yours, my darling. Let me fetch the good priest, he could tell you all this so clearly and speak such grand words to you."

"Would he come to me? But no, you must not leave me."

"You shall not be alone," said Gretchen

tenderly; "I will lay this little angel in your arms—his innocent face will guard you."

She took the baby Arthur from his cot, and laid him in his young mother's arms. He did not wake, he only stretched out his little hands and frowned with his father's frown.

Then, in the grey light of morning, and sorely distressed, Gretchen hastened through the steep, dark, narrow streets, many times slipping in her haste with her high wooden shoes over the uneven pavement stones. The good priest, Bertrand, was already astir, and Gretchen had not therefore long to wait.

"Why, Gretchen!" he said in surprise, as he entered the room, and saw who the applicant was.

"Oh, Herr Bertrand," said Gretchen tremulously—grave priest as he was, she

always called him this, because she had done so when he was a boy—"Oh, Herr Bertrand, my dear lady has come home, I fear she is very ill; she is in sore distress, and I thought that you, who can help every one, could help her also. She would gladly see you."

Bertrand's calm face grew for a moment less calm than usual, but he needed no further explanation or entreaty, and at once prepared to accompany Gretchen back through the dark and narrow streets. As they went, Gretchen repeated to him many of the, to her, incomprehensible words Verina had said, and with tears implored him to console her dear lady.

"Peace be with you," said the calm priest Bertrand, as he stood within the room where the love of his youth lay dying. He looked earnestly upon her

as he spoke. In the white, emaciated, yet still lovely face, he could discern little of the bright beauty of the Verina he had loved. Only the golden hair reminded him of her, for the once fair rounded cheeks and dimpled chin were blanched and wasted by that long fever of remorse; and the once serene blue eyes were unearthly now in their brilliancy and terror. All earth-born desires had long faded from his mind, but it was not without deep emotion that he could look again upon that altered face. That she did not recognise in the grave, thought-worn priest, the boy who had been the playmate of her childhood and secretly the lover of her early youth, he saw at once. This was as he wished. He was not willing that she should recognise him.

And now, putting quickly from him all

remembrance of their early friendship, and only recalling that she was one who needed the spiritual consolation to whose administration he had devoted his life, he addressed her with a quiet solemnity :

“ Peace be with you, lady,” he repeated in a voice whose deep calm seemed almost to bring the peace it invoked.

“ Ah, no, there can be *no* peace for me,” replied Verina, with an accent of despair. “ You do not know whom you address—you do not know how I have erred.”

“ If you have indeed erred, then especially to you is salvation offered,” said Bertrand earnestly. “ Our Lord came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance ; and is not full forgiveness assured to all who do repent ? You have sinned, and you repent; therefore in His

name, whose ambassador I am, to you especially do I offer this forgiveness. Take it freely. It is yours. Yes, even now, whilst you lie here burdened with the remembrance of the past, shuddering at your own sinfulness, already you are beloved, you are forgiven."

Verina raised herself and gazed upon him with eyes in which the dawning of a faint, faint, eager hope struggled with the dark despair which had so long enwrapped her.

"Can this really be?" she murmured; "but you would not, surely you would not deceive me!"

"Heaven forbid!" replied Bertrand. "I but repeat to you the message, to declare which my life is consecrated."

"Listen to me," said Verina faintly, "and I will tell you very briefly the history of my life; for then you will know

if I, even I, dare hope. Once, years ago, I lived in this very place—then—then—I went to England. I was miserable, very miserable there, and he came and was pitiful to me, and I loved him, and we fled together—from—my husband's house."

Verina ceased abruptly, and covered her face in her wan, white hands, tears of shame and bitter contrition falling slowly through her thin fingers. Then she said :

"Tell me, is there any hope for me?"

"Yes, lady," he answered, with a strange, grave gentleness. "And not only hope, but peace, and forgiveness, and love—infinite love and pity."

Strangely such words sounded to Verina. They broke in upon the darkness around her with a brightness so bright,

so unexpected, that she scarcely dared to trust them.

“Oh, talk to me, and tell me how this can be,” she said.

“I do not fear but that I can make it very plain to you,” said the good priest gently. He sat down beside her and read to her, and talked to her long and earnestly. Not questioningly and with wonder as [she had once listened to such words from Margaret, did Verina listen to them now. Then her life was fresh and strong, and the then high-spirited Verina could not bow herself to the calm submission, the resignation, that heavenly yoke imposed. It had needed long years of suffering to tame that eager heart ; but the eager heart was humble now, and she herself stood sorrow-laden and stained with guilt upon the threshold of Eternity. To her now, all earthly hopes, all earthly

joys were worthless, and there was but one desire within her breaking heart—that one desire was for forgiveness. Thus had she learnt at last how precious is “the Pearl beyond all price.” She had learnt this at last, and therefore the heavenly words which fell from Bertrand’s lips spoke to her with might and power. With impassioned eagerness she listened to them and pondered over them, and as she listened, slowly peace sank down upon her restless heart; and slowly, with a humble but unfaltering confidence, she grew to realise that her sin was put far, far away from her, and she herself forgiven, and purified to a far more perfect innocence than had ever yet been hers—even in the days of her early youth and gladness.

Ah, the bliss unspeakable of the hour in which this was made clear to her

long shame-bowed, stricken heart ! The long-borne weight of remorse and dread passed from her then ; and tears of a happiness, a peace, too great, too perfect, fell softly down the white face whence all grief, all pain, all fear had passed away.

With a smile radiant as an angel's in its heavenly peace and resignation, she clasped her thin hands, and raised her starry eyes, beaming with a holy gladness, a calm serenity, and murmured :

“ My Father ! I know Thee now at last ! Oh, it is well, very well, for such an hour as this to suffer even more than I have suffered ! ”

That her life had been so brief and sad no longer seemed to her strange and cruel.

“ I see it all now,” she went faintly on. “ If my life had been a happy one, I

should have been too happy; I loved so keenly that if my idols had not passed away from me, earth would have been all in all to me. I should never then have thought of heaven; never have found the peace that blesses me now; never have learnt to know Him as my Father and my Redeemer. Therefore it was that my idols ever vanished from my grasp. And I so passionately strove to keep them! I so clung to earthly hopes! I would not raise my eyes above the din of earth, and wilfully I put away from me all thoughts of heaven! A year ago I should have said this was not my fault, that I could not do otherwise. Now at length I see that I *could* not because I *would* not; now I can recall how often I have silenced the voice that spoke within me, bidding me seek no more for

earthly happiness, but to seek alone the life eternal. I silenced that voice because I would not be resigned, and even when the light from heaven shone before me, in still clearer flashes, still I would not raise my eyes to it, but bent them on the faded flowers of earth, and heeded nothing but my own rebellious despair. I would not be comforted because I would not submit. Then in mercy came the sorrow that has brought me to my Father's feet, and now, at length, I learn the secret of life."

The faint but eager whisper ceased, and Bertrand continued solemnly :

"Yes, the secret of life, of its care and sorrow and mysterious ways, is indeed that life is the battle-field, whereon are trained angels for heaven. Man's will is free. Therefore must he

himself choose his portion, and therefore is it that in our Father's great mercy He strives to make us seek Him, by proving to us all other things are worthless. This is indeed the true origin of sorrow. Listen to the prophet's words : 'In the days of prosperity remember and be joyful, but in the days of adversity consider that God also hath set the one over against the other to the end that man should find nothing after Him.' "

Verina listened and believed ; and what mattered it now to her, that the sunrise which with its first faint beams was already gilding the wet vine leaves that fluttered against her casement window, was the latest she should ever see ?

Her starry eyes were radiant still ; she only murmured :

"Oh that *he* too could know that there is peace for all!"

No other words would that sweet voice ever utter. She seemed to know this, for with a look from heaven on her wan, fair face, she stretched her languid arms towards her boy. Gretchen understood her, and raised him up to her embrace. Faintly, Verina pressed her pale lips to his rosy cheek ; and then so quietly the broken heart grew stilled in death.

* * * * *

Ere the wild sweet clock bells had chimed again, morning was shining brightly and clearly on the world without, and striving to storm with its joyful rays the darkened chamber, within which the calm priest Bertrand yet remained, kneeling beside the bed of death where so still, so fair, so wan, the love of his youth lay dead.

At length he roused himself, and laid his hand tenderly on the weeping Gretchen's shoulder.

"Good Gretchen," he said, "henceforth you will live with me."



CHAPTER XVI.

MANY years later, among the tourists on the Rhine, came Sir Arthur Mordaunt with his wife and his only son. This son was a fine, brave boy, the very image of his father, with the self-same proud, daringly resolute air; only that at times there came to his flashing eyes a look of earnest gentleness such as no other Mordaunt ever wore. When he bent that look upon his stepmother she would grow strangely discomposed.

“Ah! so here we are! This is

Rüdisheim that we are just reaching," he cried, bestowing upon his companions with eager volubility the information he was obtaining from a guide book.

"I wonder how it is," he went on, "that that odd name sounds quite familiar to me! See what a strange, quiet, dreamy old place it looks. Oh, and, father, look, look! what an odd watch-tower of a house that is, all covered with vines and with its great wide eaves! It is so tall, and looks so straight down over the roofs of all the other houses, straight down to the Rhine! What a weirdish house! I wonder if any one lives there."

No, no one lives there now, light-hearted Arthur; but in days gone by, a young girl often stood beside that open window, her clear, glad eyes shining out so serenely on the glorious Rhine. Now that young girl sleeps beneath the green turf in

that quiet churchyard, which, as you can see, crowns the highest eminence in Rüdisheim; the grey church tower is even now throwing its shadow on her grave. And once, in that very chamber towards which you look, your dying mother pressed her lips to your soft warm cheek.

Sir Arthur Mordaunt looked keenly up at the old house. It was years since anything had recalled the unhappy Verina to his remembrance. He had really quite forgotten her. And now even, he thought of her only as the outcast who had disgraced him. No repentant thought occurred to him of the ruin he had caused; no regret for the young glad life blighted—for the sullied innocence—the broken heart—the early death.

No gentler remembrances of the past came to him: no vision of a young wife

nestling closer in his embrace, with such tender love, such unfaltering trust in the lustrous depths of her beautiful eyes.

Sir Arthur Mordaunt might forget; he never forgave. But was she not a saint in heaven?

THE END.



